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THE PENDULUM
SWINGS

THE FOREVER GATE
BOOK VIII

Isaac Hooke

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Ari lowered her fire sword slightly. "Hoodwink?"

The man standing before her in the ruined square wore a leather jerkin clasped over a purple shirt with ruffled sleeves. He carried a glowing fire sword over one shoulder and seemed oblivious to the searing heat that no doubt emanated from the weapon. His black pantaloons flared above the ankles where they tucked into boots of a similar shade. A red bandanna wrapped his head. As for his features, he had thick brows, and a hooked nose bent very slightly over a mustache and goatee. He looked for all the world like a pirate. She'd never seen him before.

And yet he was grinning like a madman. Though his face was different, that crooked grin was unmistakable. Of all the things about her father, she remembered that trait about him the most fondly. And yet, was it really him...?

The man glanced at the charred remains of the square.

"I see you've kept the Inside in good upkeep while I was away, you have," he deadpanned.

When she heard that voice, she knew without a doubt that it was him.

"Dad!" Ari sheathed her weapon, tossed aside her shield, and wrapped her arms around him.

"It's good to see you, too, Ari," Hoodwink said, hugging her tight.
"More than you know. The things I had to go through to get here..."

She pulled away from him and he wiped a tear from his cheek.

"I wasn't sure if you were dead," Ari said.

"Neither was I," Hoodwink said mysteriously. He glanced at Tanner.
"Have you been taking good care of my girl?"

"For you, always, Hood," Tanner said. "Though to be honest, most of the time she's the one taking care of me."

"He's such a liar," Ari said.

"And who's the superhero?" Hoodwink nodded at the woman beside them who was wearing skin-tight blue clothes with the digits 100000 written onto the chest. Her outfit was completed by a red cape and belt.

"That's Renna," Ari said. "She's a Keeper." When Hoodwink blinked

uncomprehendingly, she added. "One of the Children."

"Ah," Hoodwink said, scooping up the shield Ari had thrown aside. He examined it uncertainly, testing its heft. "Lots of things have changed in my absence, I suppose. You'll have to catch me up, sometime."

"You'll have to catch us up, too."

"I suppose I will."

"Where are you tethered?" Tanner asked him.

"I found a terminal in an abandoned cargo bay," Hoodwink said. "It's cozy, but it's got air. And an alarm to wake me in case of trouble."

"How did you get through the external airlock?" Tanner pressed.

Hoodwink shrugged. "My command codes still opened the hatch."

Ari glanced at Tanner. "I ordered his codes left unchanged, remember?"

"Oh yeah," Tanner said. "I still think that was a potential security breach."

"If we changed them, Hoodwink wouldn't be here right now," Ari said. "He'd be trapped outside, wasting precious oxygen in his spacesuit. Maybe dying."

"If he had a spacesuit then he had a radio, too," Tanner said. "And the Children would have let him in."

"Not necessarily. The radio signal might not have passed through the hull."

"It would have," Tanner insisted.

Hoodwink grinned. "I see you two are getting along wonderfully, as usual." He paused, then abruptly started to chortle uncontrollably.

"Our argument wasn't that funny, dad..." Ari said.

Hoodwink finally contained his laughter. "No no, you're right, it wasn't. But I tell you, I did the funniest thing while I was away."

Ari felt her brows furrow. "What?"

"I freed Earth."

Ari's confusion deepened. "What do you mean?"

"Exactly that. The Satori no longer rule the planet. They roam the oceans of the Earth, leaderless, weaponless. Human beings, the small batches of them left anyway, are now free to control their destiny once more."

"Well that's great!" Ari hugged him once more. "So when can we expect help to arrive?"

"Err," Hoodwink said. "Humanity's resources are somewhat depleted

at the moment. Especially their space-faring technology. In fact, I'm not sure they have any at the moment. The only human flyers I saw were atmosphere-limited. But that's all right. I still have my handy Satori flyer. I can bring one or two of you back to Earth with me sometime. We'll meet with the survivors and come up with a rescue plan. And I can work on my Satori-human peace treaty."

"A peace treaty with the aliens?" Tanner said. "Is that even possible? I thought the Satori wanted to exterminate us all? Their religion demands it."

"Well, yes," Hoodwink said. "There is that tiny issue. But religions have been known to be flexible—many a believer has renounced his religion if only to save his or her own skin!"

"Is that the human in you talking, Hoodwink, or the Satori?" Tanner asked.

Hoodwink looked down. "The human," he admitted.

"So what are the chances of the Satori renouncing their religion?"

"Probably quite slim," Hoodwink said. "That said, there's no reason why they wouldn't sign a treaty of peace. If it ensured their survival, they would defer their religious requirements for the moment."

"Still sounds like we'd be setting ourselves up for a war in the long run."

Hoodwink's eyes glowed with zeal. "But can you imagine what both races could achieve by working together until then? We would form an amazing symbiotic civilization whose contributions to the arts and sciences would be peerless! No one would match us, not anywhere in the galaxy. Technology would advance at a phenomenal rate. Change would be inexorable, and with it would come tolerance, and finally everlasting peace."

Ari and Tanner exchanged worried looks.

"I guess I'm the only one who sees it," Hoodwink said.

"Apparently," Ari agreed.

"Well," Hoodwink said. "In any case, there are more immediate problems that demand our attention. Such as, well, the small fact that there's a Satori mothership in orbit around Ganymede once again."

Ari blinked, stunned. "What? Already?"

"You don't know? Your Children should have alerted you by now."

"They haven't." Ari glanced at Renna.

The Keeper shrugged anxiously. "This is the first I've heard of it."

"When did they arrive?" Ari asked Hoodwink.

"A few hours before me," he answered.

"Please tell me you came in a ship that could match theirs," Ari said.

"Unfortunately, no," Hoodwink admitted. "Mine is a mere mosquito in comparison. Though a fast one, mind—it can readily match their speed in deep space. It's just lacking in the firepower department. The Satori have been building that mothership of theirs for the past two hundred years, so you can expect it to pack a wee bit more of a punch."

"And the inevitable bombardments from that mothership?" Ari asked.

"Have already begun," Hoodwink said. "And unfortunately, if we don't handle that ship, when they're done blasting us to smithereens they'll probably return to the Earth and reconquer the planet."

"Hoodwink, you could have told us this sooner," Ari said.

Hoodwink sighed. "Time passes faster on the Inside. The few minutes we've talked here have only been seconds on the Outside. I figured we had lots of time to reacquaint ourselves before I shared the bad news. Besides, I thought you were already on top of it."

She glanced at Tanner. "If we haven't heard from the Children yet, something must be wrong."

"Maybe the courier they sent had trouble finding us?" Tanner said. "There are many pockets of lightning wielders in Red Mesa, yet."

"It's possible the courier was attacked, yes," Renna nodded. "Either that, or one of those bombardments Hoodwink spoke of has destroyed the Control Room."

"I hope not," Ari said.

"Well, if they did strike it, then you and I are lucky to be alive, Renna." Tanner and she were tethered via the Control Room, while Ari had gone inside from the relearning center.

Tanner retrieved his handmirror.

"Tanner, now isn't the time to admire your roguish good looks," Hoodwink said.

"Funny," Tanner replied. "See you on the Outside." He vanished a moment later.

"He's getting good at that," Hoodwink told Ari.

"He is." Ari had her own mirror out. "I'm happy you're back, Hoodwink. Very very happy."

"As am I, dear Ari." Hoodwink glanced at her mirror. "I'll see you up top once I find a mirror of my own."

"This is actually for you," Ari said, handing him the mirror. "I can't get out."

"What?"

"It's a long story, but basically we think there's a rogue in our midst. He calls himself Amoch. He's hacked the codebase, and with the help of one of his followers he inserted an item into my inventory that prevents me from leaving the Inside. Not even Tanner or any of the Children can pull me out from the Outside."

Hoodwink shook his head and said in a scolding tone: "Rogue Children? Wars on the Inside? Someone hacking the codebase? And now the Satori have returned."

"I know," Ari said. "While we were busy fighting amongst ourselves, the real enemy crept up on us."

Hoodwink regarded the mirror uncertainly. "I don't want to leave your side."

"Go back," Ari told him. "Get to the Control Room and help Tanner. They're going to need any advice you have on dealing with that mothership." She told him the location of the Control Room.

"It'll be fun getting there," Hoodwink said. "The robots have turned on us again."

Ari couldn't believe it. "What?"

"Yes. Any machine I encounter out there says 'proceed to cargo bay seven' and if I don't obey it tries to snatch me up. I was attacked three times in the passages before I found shelter in cargo bay four. It was a good thing I had a blaster, or I doubt I would have been able to escape the things."

"It must be Amoch's doing," Ari said.

"I don't know what he hopes to achieve by all of this," Hoodwink said. "Unless he is some Satori surrogate who failed to awaken when I blew up the original mothership. It's possible, I suppose, that his consciousness permanently transferred into the human body somehow, but I doubt it."

"Whatever the case, he has to be stopped." Ari chewed her upper lip. "I wonder why the robots wanted you to go to cargo bay seven?"

Hoodwink shrugged. "They're likely herding any humans they find roaming the corridors to that bay. I considered going there to check it out for myself, mind, but it felt like too much of a trap to me. I was worried they'd converted the compartment into a meat grinder or something. Finding you was my highest priority... as soon as I logged in, the AI told me you were

located three decks below in a place called the relearning center, but you were currently on the Inside in the city of Red Mesa. It didn't give me your exact location in the city, nor Tanner's. I considered contacting Stanson, but I wasn't sure he'd be happy to hear from me: I didn't leave him on all that good terms last time, if you'll recall. Besides, if the AI didn't know where you were, I doubted he would. So I injected into Red Mesa to begin my search, and here I am."

"Thank you for coming." Ari leaned a hand on his arm.

"And now you want me to go back," Hoodwink said bitterly. He sighed. "But I suppose you're right, they need me up there. All right, let's say I go. What are you going to do in the meantime?"

"This city needs some cleaning up," Ari told him. "There are still pockets of enemy fighters out there. Once things quiet down, I'll try to ferret out the location of Amoch."

"He'll be in the body of a gol, won't he?" Hoodwink asked.

Ari nodded.

"So if you can kill him here," Hoodwink said. "You'll kill him in the real world."

"Unfortunately I'm not so sure how easy that's going to be," Ari said. "I met one of his... associates, already. She called herself Wraylor, and claimed she was his wife. She seemed to have the powers of One."

"One?" Hoodwink said. "Then you better stay far away from this Amoch when you find him. At least until we find a way to defeat him."

She rested a hand on Hoodwink's arm. "Don't worry, Dad. I don't plan on getting myself killed."

"We never plan such a thing," Hoodwink said. "But sometimes things happen that we don't expect, they do. Look at what transpired before I arrived. You were pinned in this square. Trapped. Surrounded on all sides. Until I came and saved the day. And you say you want to clean up this city..."

"Renna and I will be more cautious this time," Ari said.

Hoodwink glanced at Renna. His expression appeared dubious. Then he sighed. "All right, Ari. All right. It seems like whenever we're reunited, one crisis or another always drives us apart mere moments later."

She gave him a hug. "I've missed you, too, dad."

"How will I be able to find you when I want to return?" Hoodwink asked her.

Renna produced a small spherical device. "Take this, Ari."

Ari accepted the device. It was a tracker.

Hoodwink nodded. "All right. I'll come back as soon as I'm able. Be safe, Ari. Promise me you won't do anything to endanger your life."

"I can't promise that," Ari said.

"Then promise me that you'll at least think before you act," Hoodwink said.

"I have been a bit rash in the past, haven't I?" Ari said. "I've grown up a bit since then, Hoodwink. I'm aware now that my actions have hurt the people closest to me in the past. I've changed."

"I hope so," Hoodwink said, gazing into the mirror. "For my sake. And for all our sakes. You're our captain."

"But now that you've returned, I was hoping you would be our captain again," Ari said.

Hoodwink looked up from the mirror. "I'm not sure the Children would ever trust me as captain, not anymore. I'm Satori."

"They'll follow you if I tell them to," Ari insisted.

"Maybe," Hoodwink said. "But I don't want the command, anyway. I'm happy to serve you, Ari, in whatever capacity I can. Now please, go. If you don't, I'll end up talking to you all day. I'm going to sit behind this ruined cart and I'm going to disbelieve this reality."

She hugged him one last time.

"Good luck, daughter," Hoodwink said.

Ari didn't trust herself to answer. The rugged way he said the words told of the emotion that he masked, and it choked her up inside.

Hoodwink sat down behind the cart and stared at his reflection as if intending to disbelieve reality.

Ari and Renna picked their way through the rubble of the square. Ari finally allowed a few tears to spill, but she quickly wiped them, ashamed at her weakness. Hoodwink hadn't cried, after all.

Halfway to a side street, Ari paused, glancing back. She caught Hoodwink staring at her in the mirror. He quickly tilted it to the side. She could swear his cheeks were wet.

Ari continuing on her way and wiped away another tear.

Good luck to you, too, dad. Good luck to us all.

Tanner opened his eyes. Almost all of the Children were still tethered, lying unconscious beside their terminals. Stanson wasn't at his station. Odd.

Tanner removed the tether lock from his torso and stood up to search the room. Three other terminals were unmanned.

Someone moaned on the far side of the room. Tanner squeezed past the desks and found Stanson lying on the deck. The young man was holding his head. A big red welt marred his forehead.

"Stanson!" Tanner knelt beside him. "Are you all right? What happened?"

Stanson blinked hard. "It was Kade."

"Kade attacked you?"

"Yes," Stanson said. "He and two other Children. Everyone else was Inside, except me. Dealing with the aftermath of the latest attack on the Inside. I was coordinating everyone, watching for hotspots of activity, directing the couriers as needed, when Kade attacked me. He struck me repeatedly with a bat of some kind, and then Pots and Brown dragged me to the corner while Kade took over my console. I don't know what he did, but he obviously used my elevated access privileges to install something he shouldn't have. When he left, from my position here on the deck I ordered the AI to pull out the other Keepers, but it refused. Kade obviously changed my access. I have read-only privileges and can't issue commands anymore."

The compartment abruptly shook.

"What was that?" Tanner said.

"The attack alarms started shortly after Kade and his followers had gone. I assumed it was some false warning he'd planted to sow confusion, but when the compartment began to rumble, I realized it was real. With my read-only access, I was able to confirm that there was indeed an attacker in orbit. Thankfully the automated defenses had kicked-in. At least Kade hadn't disabled those."

Tanner attempted to access one of the vacated terminals beside him. "I've been locked out, too."

Stanson nodded. "We can connect to the Inside, and not much more."

Two high-pitched alarms sounded simultaneously from the far side of the room. Tanner recognized it as the heart rate alert, which activated when the heart of a tethered individual stopped. It was an alarm no one working in the Control Room ever wanted to hear. It meant that someone had died violently on the Inside, and the organic wires from the umbilical had cooked the contents of his or her skull.

Tanner rushed over and attempted to resuscitate the first operator. Stanson drunkenly ambled to his side, taking the second operator. Both of them failed to revive either individual.

"Damn it." Tanner sat back on the deck. The two would have been acting as Keepers, probably in Red Mesa. Lightning wielders had likely ambushed them on the Inside. He immediately worried for Ari's safety.

She can take care of herself, he reminded himself.

"We have to get more operators up here to replace the five we've lost," Tanner said. "Can we summon them with read-only access?"

"Probably not," Stanson said.

"Then one of us will have to visit their quarters and manually retrieve them."

"Not so easy," Stanson said. "Robots have cordoned off this compartment. We can't get out."

"What the hell is Kade doing?" Tanner said, mostly to himself.

"He obviously wants to take control of the ship," Stanson said. "And whatever he plans, it can't be good. The code he put into the system to sedate those who wake up is no longer working, and people are leaving the Inside by the dozens. According to the AI, the robots are gathering the former dreamers into a cargo bay not far from the relearning center."

Tanner frowned. The ship's resources were already stretched to the maximum. There simply wasn't enough food to meet the caloric requirements of even a few more awakened people, let alone dozens of them.

"The AI tells me that if the newly awakened try to leave the cargo bay, the robots attack and kill them," Stanson said. "Can you imagine that? People crawling on their bellies in terror, their muscles atrophied from a lifetime of dreaming, trying to escape these iron monsters? And through it all, they have no idea what's going on?"

"It can't be pleasant," Tanner agreed, remembering the horror of his own awakening. He accessed a nearby terminal.

"AI, location of Operator Kade?" he asked it.

"Unable to locate," the AI returned.

"Location of Operators Pots or Brown?"

"Unable to locate," the AI repeated.

"Damn it." He glanced at Stanson. "How is he masking his location?"

Stanson shook his head. "I have no idea, Tanner. Could be part of whatever code he injected into my terminal."

There was one last thing Tanner could try. "AI, last known location of Operator Kade?"

"Operator Kade was last observed on deck five, near compartment 5-22-4-A."

"Good thinking," Stanson said. "Though I somehow doubt he's near that area."

Tanner nodded. "Well, we can't exactly search for him at the moment, not with those robots guarding our door. Let's work on these systems. See if we can restore our access privileges. Try connecting in zero mode."

"But we disabled the zero mode connect feature on all the Control Room terminals," Stanson said.

"Let's try each terminal anyway," Tanner said. "We have to do something while we wait for Hoodwink to arrive, and I'd prefer not to just sit here. Hopefully he'll be able to clear the robots from the entrance, and then we can try the terminals somewhere else if we can't get in here."

The compartment shook from another attack.

"Wait a second," Stanson said. "Hoodwink? He's here?"

"Yes," Tanner said. "Though for how long he'll be with us this time, I have no idea."

three

Hoodwink entered his access code into the keypad. He half-expected to be locked out, but like before, the code worked and the hatch clicked open.

Blaster in hand, Hoodwink slowly peered into the hallway outside. The way seemed clear, so he stepped outside. He was wearing a pair of wireless aReal glasses, which he had purloined from the cargo bay. The "ship map" feature was working, which kept his location centered while the blueprints of the Hercules generation ship updated around him to correspond with his latest position. He had already set Tanner's location in the Control Room as his destination, and it flashed on the map ahead.

Translucent pods lined the corridor. Human bodies floated within them, blanketed in a green goo, sleepers living in the world of the Inside. One pod was an opaque black, a sign that the occupant had died.

These pods were a common enough sight on a colony ship, he supposed. Traveling to other stars took centuries, and the hibernating crew certainly couldn't be expected to undertake the entire journey while awake. Too bad this crew had spent the past two hundred years stuck in one place, though, crashed on Ganymede. If the Satori in orbit had their way, the colonists would never leave that moon. And what this so-called Amoch was doing certainly didn't help matters.

Up ahead he saw a bone-thin man, his skin a bright red, wrinkled like a raisin. It reminded him a little of the skin of a newborn. The man crawled on the deck, newly emerged, still connected by a fleshy umbilical to the pod beside him. Green slime oozed from a slit in the membrane near the bottom of the pod and seeped through the floor grill to the deck below.

"Mom," the man was saying between coughs. "Mom!"

Hoodwink knelt beside the man. "Don't be afraid. I'm going to hoist you over my shoulder and carry you. But first I have to cut your umbilical."

The man fainted.

Hoodwink realized that the man was extremely old. Likely, if Hoodwink lifted him, his bones would break. In fact, he'd probably already broken all his ribs from the effort of coughing up all that green muck in his lungs.

Hoodwink was about to drag him when he realized the man was no longer breathing. He checked his pulse. Nothing. The man had died, the rebirth too much for his atrophied, ancient body to take.

Hoodwink heard the mechanical whir of servomotors and moving treads coming from the forward direction. He glanced up. One of the ship's maintenance machines approached. The head seemed like a sword hilt, with three camera lenses for eyes located underneath a red proximity sensor. A corrugated, flexible black bag connected the steel torso to rolling treads. The telescoping arms ended in powerful steel pincers.

"I blame *you* for this," Hoodwink said to the approaching robot. He unleashed his blaster, tearing a new arsehole into its chest. Sparks flew and the machine ground to a halt. Through the hole, Hoodwink could see the seared ends of different colored wires and circuit boards.

Hoodwink continued his advance. Most of the time he chose to hide between the pods, or to escape to another deck via a vertical trunk when one or more robots presented themselves. If he destroyed too many it would adversely affect the ship's self-maintenance capabilities. Given the current Satori bombardment, that would not be a good thing.

The deck shook occasionally around him, reminding him of that very attack. The Satori had upgraded their weapons since the last encounter: it was doubtful the crashed human ship would be able to hold out for even a tenth as long as it had during their last encounter. Hoodwink estimated they had a day, maybe two, before the Satori destroyed all of the offensive and defensive capabilities of the Hercules ship, leaving it ripe for final destruction. Once that was done, the mothership would return to Earth, and likely attempt to reconquer the planet. For that reason alone it was vital that the humans on Ganymede did not fall.

He reached the hallway adjacent to the Control Room. He peered around the edge and spotted five robots guarding it from the outside. He decided there was nothing for it but to exterminate them all. The ship would simply have to suffer the loss of five maintenance robots.

Hoodwink fired five shots, disabling the robots. He squeezed between them to the door and once more his code granted him entry.

Inside he found Tanner and Stanson the only ones active in a roomful of dreaming terminal operators.

"Is that him?" Stanson said.

"That's Hoodwink, yes," Tanner said.

"His face has changed."

"My face may have changed," Hoodwink said, holstering the blaster. "But I'm still the same man I was. For the most part."

Stanson came forward. "It's good to see you, Hood."

"You've forgiven me, then?" Hoodwink told the man. "Even if I'm one of the Enemy?"

"How could I not?" Stanson said. "You saved us all."

"I suppose I did, at that," Hoodwink agreed. "Mind, I had help." He glanced at Tanner.

"I didn't blow up the mothership," Tanner said.

"Any chance of that happening the same way again?" Stanson said hopefully.

"Not this time," Hoodwink said. "See, there's a small problem. I'm not actually aboard the mothership."

"Then where are you?" Stanson asked.

"I'm inside a small flyer parked a short ways outside your own ship." He glanced at the Children sleeping in front of the terminals. "Update me on the situation."

Tanner and Stanson did just that.

"So you tried to access all of the terminals in zero mode?" Hoodwink asked.

"Yes," Tanner said. "They've all been disabled. Including the two wireless access ports we have."

"So what you're saying is that we need to get to another set of terminals before we can even begin to hope to bypass the locks this Amoch, or Kade, has put on the system."

"That's right."

Hoodwink pursed his lips. "All right, Tanner, we'll make our way to the berthing area to gather up what Children we can from the other watches, and we'll try different terminal access points as we go."

"What about me?" Stanson asked.

"You stay here," Hoodwink told him. "With read-only access, you should still have the ability to review the code check-ins made in the past few months. Make a note of all the modifications Kade, Brown and Pots have made. Keep an eye out for any code that might override the wake-up subroutine. It'll be attached to an inventory-capable item, something that could be embedded in an avatar's belongings. I don't want my daughter

trapped in there an eternity, I don't."

"I'll get on it," Stanson said.

Hoodwink approached the door. "Tanner, with me."

four

Amoch sat in his tent in the makeshift camp in the desert outside the Forever Gate of Rhagnorak. From behind a mask of artificial darkness shrouding his face, he stared at a world map arrayed before him. The cities he had destroyed were colored red. So far, there were only five of them.

He was genuinely worried. The alien attack had been unexpected, and made him doubt his plans. He almost wanted to restore control to the Children, but he knew there was nothing they could do any better than him. It was the machines that actually fought back to protect them from the Satori. He would just have to trust that the ship's defenses would hold out.

The tent flap lifted and one of the guardsmen stuck his head inside. "Sir, the Dragon Lady has returned."

"Send her inside," Amoch said, glad for the distraction.

The woman who had once called herself Gemma entered the tent. She was dressed in body-fitting silver armor covered in swirls and curlicues. The hilt of a samurai sword protruded above her right shoulder, where it was sheathed on her back. She still wore the silver mask that was forged into the shape of a Chinese dragon over her face. That was a good sign of her loyalty. Then again, perhaps she'd simply grown to like the powers it granted her, which included the ability to see the location of any human beings behind walls, among other things.

"It is done," the Dragon Lady said. "I have touched the disk to the forehead of the gol Nine, as you asked. After the object vanished within her, I escaped before she could question me."

Amoch nodded his head in respect. "I am pleased." That disk trapped Ari on the Inside: one less problem he had to worry about.

"What do you want me to do now?" the woman asked.

"Report to my general Hadrian and await further instructions."

She turned to go, but paused. "You promised when the time came, I would be given Nine to kill."

"And you will. When the time comes."

She nodded slowly, and then left. An interesting tool, that one. Bent on vengeance. The most useful tools were, he supposed.

Sammuel reported in shortly thereafter.

"Any sign of my dear wife?" Amoch asked the man.

"No, master," Sammuel said. "It appears she obeyed your order, this time."

Sammuel was to inform him if any of the eyes and ears spotted Wraylor on the Inside. She was under strict orders from Amoch to remain in the real world. Wraylor had warned Ari of the attack on Crane, and while Amoch had managed to use the warning to his advantage, he was not very happy with his wife, not in the least. She was banned from the Inside until further notice. He wasn't sure if he would even allow her to fight at his side in the final battle. She was too much of a wild card.

I should have never freed her from the dream world.

He heard shouting outside. Then the clang of steel on steel, along with a few lightning blasts. The fabric of the tent caved inward on one side as a human body struck it and got lost in the folds.

Amoch waited patiently, not perturbed in the least. Unlike the outside world, nothing that occurred in the Inside bothered him.

He focused on the entrance and tightened his fingers on the bone staff he held. He let the vitra from within it fill him.

He wondered absently if Ari had finally found him. *Am I ready, mentally, to face her?*

He heard more steel clashes, these just outside the entrance. One of the guardsmen came flying inside, body spewing blood from a mortal wound in the torso.

Brute followed the man inside. A snarl twisted the four-armed creature's face.

Not Ari after all then. A pity.

Amoch froze the red-skinned beast.

"Why did you have to do that?" Amoch regarded the lifeless, torn body of the guardsman at his feet. "He was one of my best."

Brute didn't answer.

"Ah." Amoch waved a hand, releasing the invisible lock on Brute's lips.

"They would not let me pass!" Brute said.

Amoch shrugged. "I should have warned them, I suppose. The problem is, I wasn't expecting you. What *are* you doing here? You were to seek out those who call themselves Keepers and eliminate them one by one.

You were to return to aid me in the razing of certain cities only when summoned. And I did not summon you. Don't tell me I have to erase your program and start again."

"Do not erase, Amoch-krub," Brute said. "Someone found Brute."

"Someone found you?" Amoch thrummed his fingers impatiently on his staff. Was he going to have to reprogram the thing after all? "Explain."

Brute's eyes slid to the right, as if the creature was trying to look behind. But since it could not turn its head, that was impossible, of course.

The tent flap at the entrance parted and a man came inside. Strangely, he was dressed in a suit and tie. The individual dropped to his knees and knelt when he saw him.

"It's true!" the man said, his gaze on the floor. "You live!"

Amoch didn't recognize him. And the man most certainly couldn't see Amoch's face, which yet lay shrouded in artificial darkness beneath the hood.

"Who are you?" Amoch said.

The man still didn't look up. "Great One, I am here to serve you. Forgive my past transgressions. I realize now I was not yet worthy of your reward. Tell me what I must do to serve you. Tell me what I must do to be worthy."

Great One? The man could only mean One, the former primary AI that had been infected with the alien virus. Amoch had modeled his avatar after that AI.

"Who are you?" Amoch repeated.

"I am Jeremy Flanners, rightful mayor of Severest. Your humble, everlasting servant."

Jeremy Flanners, the Satori surrogate who had created the virus that had wreaked havoc throughout the computer system? The very same Jeremy who had gone insane, and apparently worshiped his own creation?

Amoch nodded slowly. If it was indeed him, Amoch could certainly find a use for the man. Still, he would have to watch him very closely, and keep Jeremy on a tight leash.

He smiled behind that mask of darkness. Leashes were his specialty. "Rise, Jeremy."

Tanner and Hoodwink made their way through the robot-patrolled corridors. They paused at the various hatches to check if there were any terminals in the compartments beyond that allowed for "zero mode" connections. Finally they found a small storage closet near hydroponics that still had a few wireless access ports with the mode enabled.

"This will work," Hoodwink said. He plugged the port into his belly and his eyes moved back and forth rapidly as he accessed the umbilical user interface.

A moment later Hoodwink announced: "I've managed to restore much of my access. I can wake the Keepers. And I believe I can contact the other members of the watch."

"Jacob is the commander of the second watch," Tanner said.

"I'll try him," Hoodwink said. A moment later: "Jacob, this is Hoodwink and Tanner. Yes, I'm back. Can you make your way to the main Control Room? You can't?" He glanced at Tanner. "They're trapped. We'll be right there, Jacob."

He disconnected the metal cylinder from his belly and stuffed it into a small satchel along with the other two. "Several robots have sealed off his berthing area."

The pair hurried through the corridors until they reached the berthing area. Peering past a bend in the passage, they spotted five maintenance robots camped out in front.

"Okay, you hide here." Hoodwink pointed behind one of the nearby pods. "I'll draw them away."

"Wait," Tanner said. "If I have to wait here, isn't it better if I'm the one with the blaster? I'll be defenseless if they discover me. Plus what do I do if some of the robots stay behind?"

Hoodwink hesitated, then slid the blaster from his holster and handed it to Tanner. Then he dashed out into the corridor and shouted at the robots. Hoodwink waited a few seconds, and then turned around and hotfooted it out of there in the opposite direction.

Tanner held his breath as the robots rolled by in turn. One machine. A

second. A third.

He waited, but no more robots appeared. Only three of them had pursued: the other two robots had stayed behind.

Tanner stepped from cover and fired the blaster at the remaining pair.

He hurried to the door and tried his access code. The hatch clicked open. At least he hadn't lost the ability to open doors yet.

"Tanner!" Jacob said, coming forward. He was one of the oldest people on the Outside, the perfect example of why Tanner preferred not to refer to the operators as "Children." He was wearing his service utilities, and had a full body exoskeleton on top of that. Without it, he wouldn't have been able to walk.

His face was a wrinkly mess, with ears like shrunken scraps of old leather, and eyes so deep-set it was as if he viewed the world from two funnels. He was one of those so-called New Users who had coordinated the final assault against One a year ago. He had died in that attack and awakened inside his pod. His real world body proved to be nearly as old as his virtual one, and he barely survived the rebirth.

"We'll need you and four of your men to come with us to the Control Room," Tanner told him. "We've lost operators."

"What's going on?" Jacob said.

"Kade has betrayed us. He's locked us out of most of the system. We're clawing our way back."

Jacob shook his head. "Our best programmer. How could he do this to us?"

"No one knows," Tanner said. "Worst of it is, there's another alien attack."

"When it rains..." Jacob said.

"Here." Tanner handed Jacob one of the wireless access ports. "Leave this with the men who stay behind. They can use it to keep in contact with us, or go Inside as necessary."

Tanner led Jacob and the four men outside. Hoodwink had already doubled-back and apparently had been about to open the door.

"There you are," Hoodwink said.

"Hoodwink," Jacob returned. "I'll be damned."

"Nice to see you too."

"Last time I saw you," Jacob continued. "You threw yourself beyond the system boundaries in the desert. Which is the equivalent of throwing

yourself into a blender, or so I hear."

"Yes," Hoodwink said. "We can all talk about it over drinks sometime soon, but at the moment we have to fly. Those machines are right behind me."

Tanner followed his gaze down the corridor and saw the three machines rounding the bend. "Let's go!" Tanner said.

The group exited the berthing compartment.

"My blaster, if you please?" Hoodwink said.

Tanner handed it over and the group hurried back to the Control Room.

"Glad to see you made it in one piece," Stanson told them.

"Your access should be close to what it was before," Hoodwink told him. "I've reset the access flags for most members of the active watches. I tried to change the privileges of Kade and his fellows, but of course that didn't work. See if you can change the access codes on the hatches."

Stanson tried. "I think that worked."

"Ship-wide?" Hoodwink said. "Or just the hatch to this compartment?"

"Ship-wide," Stanson said.

Hoodwink went to the door and tried his code. It didn't work. "That's a good start. At least now we know Kade and his little group will be stuck in whatever compartment they currently reside in."

"Until he finds a way to hack his way out of it," Jacob added.

"The biggest benefit for us, I think," Tanner said. "Is that we don't have to worry about the robots unexpectedly barging in on our current location."

"Good point," Jacob said.

"I want to discuss some strategies," Hoodwink said. "First of all, how can we eliminate this Amoch character who's causing Ari such grief on the Inside?"

"Can't," Jacob said. "From what I've heard, he's invincible. He's like One reincarnate. Fire, lightning, steel, nothing can harm him. And he can freeze the avatars of anyone around him, so no one can even get close enough to him to even *try* to harm him."

"Can we change the flags on his avatar?" Hoodwink said. "And remove those invincibilities?"

"We've tried," Stanson said. "We haven't been able to isolate his

avatar in the system. The data is encrypted across multiple drives. It's like trying to find a needle in a million haystacks."

"Remind me to schedule a rewrite for the search function sometime," Hoodwink said. "We need to make it easier to look-up avatars."

"We're still recovering from the aftermath of the virus Jeremy put into the system," Stanson said. "We lost much of the source code, and we've had to construct several pieces from scratch. Kade was responsible for most of it, as you may or may not know. I think he purposely wrecked the avatar search function."

"You're all missing the obvious here," Tanner said. "And that is: Amoch is probably Kade's avatar. We unplug Kade, we unplug Amoch. And if we can capture Kade and his little group, I have no doubt we can get them to revert all the hacks they've implemented. Sit him down with me to watch him work, and give me that blaster of yours, Hood, and I'll get the system fixed. Right quick, as you would say."

Hoodwink smiled.

One of the operators in Jacob's group spoke up. His name was Bronson.

"What about one of the Dwarfs?" Bronson said. "The representations of the sub-AIs in the system? Because they can veto the instructions of the main AI, they could ignore any code changes that are masking Kade's location. They might be able to help pinpoint the position of him and the others on the ship."

Tanner nodded. "That's a good idea. They might be able to help us in other ways, too. Such as tracking down some of those code changes that have given Amoch all of his powers."

"All right," Hoodwink said. "Some good, solid ideas there. But now I want to talk about the second problem that's ailing us." On cue, the compartment rumbled from an attack. "The Satori mothership in orbit."

"We have to eliminate that mothership," Hoodwink continued. "And soon. She's more powerful than the previous ship we had to deal with. Our human vessel won't be able to withstand her for more than a few days, at most."

"But what else can we do other than let the automated defenses wear them down?" Tanner said.

Hoodwink turned toward Stanson. "The Hercules class of colony ships come with shuttles, don't they?"

Stanson nodded. "They do. And in fact we've been sending our shuttles out on exploratory runs already, to survey the moon for mineral deposits, and to retrieve chunks of ice from the surface to melt into fresh water. There are ten shuttles aboard, but only five of them are still operational."

"Is there enough propellant to achieve escape velocity?"

"If we dig into the storage tanks, yes," Stanson said.

"And the stuff is still volatile after all these years?"

"Should be," Stanson said. "According to the archives, the standard protocol is to fill the tanks with preservation agents before long-term storage. We used one of those tanks to fuel the existing shuttles, after all, and that worked."

Hoodwink nodded. "All right. Have an engineering team get each of the working shuttles fueled, and then instruct them to run full diagnostics."

"Wait, you're not planning on using these shuttles to assault that massive Satori mothership are you?" Jacob said, the incredulity obvious in his voice.

"Perhaps I am," Hoodwink said. "Tell me, Stanson, what kind of weapons are aboard each shuttle?"

"Nothing that could harm the Satori ship," Stanson said. "A couple of X2 lasers, nothing more. Not even any missiles."

Hoodwink tapped his chin. "We'll need a bomb."

Jacob threw up his arms. "A bomb. Is that the best you can come up with? And where are we going to get one?"

Stanson pursed his lips. "This colony ship was equipped with nukes as part of its offensive weaponry. I think there are still two aboard that were left unfired. The AI probably stopped launching them when it realized the nukes had no effect on the enemy's shielding system. I'll have to confirm the inventory." He reached for the terminal.

"I already confirmed it," Hoodwink said. "There are indeed two." He had been hoping to find a way to use the material in those warheads to prolong the ship's nuclear power source, which had a current lifespan of about fifty years, but if they needed those warheads for a bomb, well, there was nothing for it.

"We'll never get close enough to detonate those nukes," Jacob said. "They'll shoot us out of the sky."

"We *will* get close," Hoodwink said. "You forget, I still have my alien flyer."

"What makes you so sure they won't fire anyway?"

Hoodwink grinned. "Some creative social engineering."

"All right," Stanson said. "Let's say you do get close. What about the black mist that shields them? You've all watched the archives of the invasion of Earth? Not even nukes could penetrate it."

"Again," Hoodwink said. "Some creative ingenuity on my part. I plan on bringing the entire shielding system down. Once that's done, they'll fire at the shuttles with all they have. That's where you guys come in. You'll need to take out two key point-defense turrets, which I'll indicate on the data the Hercules sensors have been gathering. We'll never be able to land while those turrets are active."

"You want the colony ship to use its defensive weapons offensively?" Stanson said.

"That's exactly what I want. The shuttles might be able to take out the turrets with the X2 lasers, but it's risky, and I'd rather rely on the more powerful weaponry aboard the Hercules. Any objections?" Hoodwink waited. "Good. Stanson, I want you to start prepping both nukes for transfer to the shuttles. We'll use the first to blow a hole into the hull of the mothership. Then a couple of us will land on her and make a trip inside, porting the bomb with us. We'll plant it close to her reactor core. When that detonates, the whole ship goes with it." Hopefully the evac pods would trigger before then, so not too many Satori would die in the blast.

"That's the craziest plan I ever heard of," Jacob said. "First of all you

want to fly past their defenses, including their shield system, which no human weapon has ever penetrated. Then you want to plant a nuclear bomb on their hull, and once that detonates, you want to send a boarding party to wander around inside their ship until they find a good spot to place the second bomb. Likely said boarding party will face resistance the whole time. And once the bomb is situated, they're supposed to get the hell out of there before it detonates."

Hoodwink grinned stiffly. "Yep. That pretty much sums it up."

Jacob looked to Tanner and Stanson. "He's a madman."

"A madman is precisely what we need right about now," Tanner said.

"What about you, Stanson?" Jacob asked. "You're going to go along with this?"

"I can't see that we have any other options," Stanson responded.

"I'm glad that we're all on the same page," Hoodwink said with an ironic grin. "Now, I'll want to bring all five shuttles to give the Satori something else to shoot at other than my flyer and the two shuttles carrying the bombs. For that, I'll need some good pilots. Know where I can find any?"

"Why not rely on the AIs?" Stanson said.

Hoodwink frowned. "I don't trust AIs to man the shuttles. Not when Kade or one of his lackeys could have potentially infected them."

"Good point." Stanson tapped his chin. "I think I know at least one person who might be a good fit. Someone who recently emerged, as luck would have it."

Hoodwink cocked his head. "Oh?"

seven

Hoodwink made his way through the crowded relearning center. He had to play the usual cat and mouse game to get inside, as five robots guarded the entrance, and he wasn't keen on destroying them all. Despite their predicament, the people trapped within seemed in relatively high spirits. Most of them probably didn't even know that robots hemmed them inside — the individuals who resided there for the most part ate, drank, and slept in that compartment. Gel tubes distributed rations and water to that portion of the ship, toilets allowed for sewage disposal, and a profusion of mats allowed anyone to sleep comfortably on the floor.

Around him those members of the recently awakened exercised on the various machines, or sat together in cleared areas on the floor. They all wore aReal glasses and short-sleeved patient gowns, with roughly two-thirds of the occupants clad in mechanical exoskeletons.

Hoodwink spotted Caylin but the little girl promptly scowled, crossed her arms, and turned her back on him.

He saw a woman lying on the deck beside her, tethered to a terminal. It could only be Ari.

Hoodwink approached. Yes, that was indeed his daughter. She looked rather thin compared to her avatar on the Inside, but she was otherwise none the worse for wear.

She was wearing a blue patient gown, and a total parenteral drip was connected to her body via the cephalic vein in the crook of her arm. Two tubes led out from underneath the hem of the gown and connected to an excretion collection device. All those support lines reminded Hoodwink of the surrogate bodies he had seen on Earth—lifeless, soulless beings who waited to receive Satori consciousnesses. He shuddered involuntarily.

She's not a surrogate, she'll never be a surrogate.

He rested a hand on her shoulder.

Ah, my Ari, but it is good to see you. I wish you were here with me now. You're breathing the same air as me, lying on the same deck, and yet you're so very far away.

"You need to feed Commander Ari more," Hoodwink told Caylin.

"Would you do that for me, when she wakes up?"

Caylin glanced at him but quickly looked away.

"Caylin, are you listening, lass?" Hoodwink pressed.

"Why should I talk to you?" Caylin said. "You left us."

Hoodwink sighed. "I didn't leave you on purpose." Actually he did, but just not for the reasons that she thought.

"You're one of the Enemy," Caylin said stubbornly.

"And so I am. Mind, that doesn't actually *make* me an enemy. It's a bit confusing, I know. Half the time I'm confused myself." He waited, but the little girl didn't look at him. "All right, it was good to see you again, Caylin. You take good care of my Ari, you hear?" Hoodwink turned to go.

Caylin abruptly spun about and wrapped her arms around his legs in a tight hug. "Please don't go, Hoodwink."

Touched, he rested a hand on her head and wrapped his fingers around her thick locks. "I'll be back, soon. I'm here to see someone named Zak."

Caylin shook his hand from her head and looked up. "Zak? I've met him. He hates me."

"I'm sure you're imagining it, you are. No one could hate someone as adorable as you."

"No he does," Caylin insisted. "He hates all of us." She swept her hand around the compartment. "All of this."

"It sounds like a reaction we've seen in other Children before," Hoodwink said. "He's blind to what is real."

"Is that because he's dipped headfirst in shit?" Caylin asked innocently.

Hoodwink couldn't suppress a small laugh. "I taught you that, didn't I? Don't be repeating the words you hear me speak, little one. They're not for your clean mouth. Anyway, I really must go. You don't know where Ben is, do you? He's the relearning specialist in charge of Zak."

Caylin shook her head. "One of the other specialists will know. Or Helen."

"All right," Hoodwink said. "Please keep an eye on my dear Ari for me."

"I'm going to protect her," Caylin said proudly. "And make sure no one harms her. When the needle people come, I wouldn't let them hook her up to the sugar water until they confirmed their credentials."

"Well done, Caylin." Hoodwink gently extricated himself from the little girl. "I'll see you soon."

"Goodbye, Hoodwink," she said sadly.

Hoodwink glanced one last time at the unconscious Ari and then quickly moved on.

He hailed one the relearning specialists, who was readily identifiable by the dark blue service utilities he wore, and asked him where to find Ben. The individual pointed toward the far side of the center.

Hoodwink made his way toward that spot and finally spotted another blue uniform on a young, bearded man seated on the floor beside several unconscious people who were tethered by umbilicals to terminals. The man's eyes were slightly defocused—he was obviously viewing something on his aReal.

Hoodwink sat cross-legged beside the man. "You're Ben?"

The man nodded absently. "I am."

"You count a Zak among your students?"

Ben looked at him for the first time. "Zak is one of my students, yes."

"I hear he has the potential to be a pilot," Hoodwink said.

"Potential, perhaps," Ben said. "But attitude in equal amounts."

"Is he here?" Hoodwink glanced at the dreamers beside them.

"That's him," Ben said. "Third from your right. The one with the clenched jaw."

The indicated individual was young, no more than nineteen or twenty. His features were gaunt—all bony angles—but somewhat handsome, Hoodwink supposed. Ladies would certainly like him once he filled out a bit. Tiny welts and scabs lined his beard area, evidence that he had recently started shaving. His cropped hair was so thin that Hoodwink could see the scalp underneath. And his jaw was indeed clenched, the muscles standing out on the sides of his face.

"What kind of simulation do you have him in?" Hoodwink asked.

"It's basically a shuttle landing on a moon during an attack," Ben said. He gestured toward the others. "All of them are participating."

"A shuttle landing during an attack?" Hoodwink said. "Sounds just like what I'm looking for. Mind tapping me into his feed?"

Ben didn't answer. Instead, a view authorization request appeared on Hoodwink's aReal. He accepted.

A video feed appeared in the upper right of his vision. Hoodwink

maximized it to take up his entire field of view.

He was looking out on the world from the eyes of the shuttle pilot. Hands were visible at the periphery of his vision, and they operated the controls.

Through the main window he saw the pocked, yellowish surface ice of a moon, presumably Ganymede. Long, bright streams of plasma fire rained down from above. More plasma bursts came at the craft from directly ahead.

The pilot steered through them with exceptional skill.

Hoodwink heard a voice. "Stay tight, people! Follow my lead. Remember, I'm your shield. If I make a mistake, I go down. But the rest of you will fly on."

"Until the next person in line goes down," someone quipped.

The pilot glanced at the overhead map. Four other shuttles were arrayed in a straight line behind his own craft; they were doing a good job of mirroring his movements and staying behind him.

"Making final approach," the pilot said.

Up ahead, a flashing target indicated the landing area on the surface of the moon.

"This is the tricky part," the pilot said.

The pilot initiated reverse thrust, canceling all forward motion so that the craft was positioned over the target. The craft then began its descent.

The pilot glanced at the map and continued to dodge the incoming plasma beams.

Until the display abruptly turned black.

"Direct impact," a computerized female voice said. "Your shuttle has been destroyed."

The video feed terminated.

Zak abruptly sat up.

"You cheated!" he told Ben.

The specialist sighed. "No, Zak. You were hit."

"You increased the intensity of the plasma bolts that were coming in just when I was about to land."

"I didn't do anything," Ben said. "It only seemed like there were more incoming bolts because you were standing relatively still. You were basically a sitting duck. You should have rocked the shuttle to the left and right more, and back and forth, to make yourself a harder target to hit."

"I was dodging as best as I could," Zak complained. "If I moved any

more, I would have put the other shuttles at risk. They were relying on me to be their shield."

Hoodwink stepped in. "And what if the cargo you possessed was more important than theirs? What if you were the one in need of shielding?"

Zak glanced up at him. "Who are you?"

Hoodwink looked at Ben. "Make sure none of the others awaken from the simulation. Respawn them as necessary until I'm done with Zak."

Ben shrugged. "You got it."

Hoodwink studied Zak. "I'm looking for a few good men to fly a top secret mission with me. I hear you're one of the best."

Zak narrowed his eyes. "I asked you who you were."

"Perhaps you've heard of me," Hoodwink said, all confident-like. "I'm Hoodwink Cooper."

Zak's expression crumpled in confusion. "Hood who?"

Hoodwink sighed. "Guess not. I'm the one who saved your little behind when you were still being nursed on the Inside by your mother."

"No one nursed me," Zak said bitterly. "I grew up on the streets. You can go back to wherever you came from, because I'm not interested."

Hoodwink tapped his chin. "They weren't kidding when they said you had attitude."

"Why should I treat you with respect?" Zak asked. "None of this is real anyway."

"Is that what you think?" Hoodwink said. "Perhaps we should test your theory. We can walk to the nearest airlock and open her up. When you're sucked outside, I'll proceed to the viewing area in the mess hall and point out your mummified corpse to the other students. 'Do you see him?' I'll tell them. 'He's the one who thought none of this was real. Well, he got his wish in the end. None of this is real to him. Not anymore.' What do you think of that?"

Zak shrugged.

"Don't you get it?" Hoodwink said. "The world is what you make it out to be. All of this is as real as you allow it to be. The Inside is real. The Outside is real. What the eyes see, the ears hear, and the senses feel... the brain interprets these signals and forms the various notions of the world that constitute reality. Light reflects from surfaces to our eyes, which in turn directs that light to our brains in the form of an image, but because of the nature of our irises it appears upside-down. Our brains flip the image,

creating the reality that all of us walk through this world right-side up. And that's just the first interpretation. When the image is presented to the subconscious, even more stereotypes and preconceptions are applied. We create our own realities.

"Tell me, would the world be any less real if we had some device plugged into our bellies that fed images, sounds and sense data to the wires implanted in our spinal cords? Would it? That simulation you were just inside, did it not feel real to you?"

Zak sighed. "I— I don't know anymore. Reality is... confusing."

Hoodwink chortled. "Tell me about it." He gazed intently at Zak. "Help me. I need a pilot with your skills."

"But I was hit in there," Zak said. "I don't think I'm good enough."

Hoodwink glanced at Ben. "Did any of the others land in that clusterfuck you arranged?"

Ben shook his head. "They all were hit and respawned."

"That's what I thought." Hoodwink turned to Zak. "I think Ben might have the difficulty level turned a bit high. Your skills are more than appropriate for what I need."

"I'll think about it," Zak said.

"All right," Hoodwink said. "But don't think overlong. You can contact me on my aReal. I'm sending my ID now."

Hoodwink transmitted the number and then got up.

"You know," Zak said. "Inside, when I'm piloting the shuttle, that right there seems the most real to me out of all of this. In there, I finally feel like I'm a part of something again. Like I have purpose. Like I'm needed. And the adrenaline, man. It really gets my heart pumping. Really makes me feel alive. Almost as much as vitra did."

Hoodwink nodded slowly. "You come with me, I'll certainly give you purpose, my boy. Though I can't promise you'll feel alive. Nor can I even promise you'll even come back in one piece. But I'll definitely give your life meaning, because you'll be fighting for us all."

With that, he left Zak to his decision.

* * *

Hoodwink led a party of engineers through the corridors. The robot patrols had decreased, he thought — the robots were being called away to repair the ongoing damage to the hull. He had encountered two entire sections sealed off along the way, due to hull breaches, and had to find

alternate routes.

Eventually the group reached the launch bay and once there Hoodwink had the engineers work on the shuttles. He had a specific set of modifications for them to make, which included the installation of electronic countermeasures to confuse the alien weapons systems.

Tanner joined him shortly after his arrival.

"How does Ari fare?" Hoodwink asked him.

"I got back from the Inside half an hour ago," Tanner said. "Red Mesa has been secured. That said, there's not much left of the city. The Keepers are working overtime to rebuild everything."

"I asked you how Ari was doing?" Hoodwink pressed.

Tanner sighed. "She's frustrated, as you can imagine. She wants to come here and see you, but she can't. And she hasn't heard any news on Amoch, yet."

Hoodwink nodded. "Has Stanson found the location of any of the Dwarf sub-AIs on the Inside?"

"Not yet. Because we don't have a working search function yet, he can't just initiate a lookup from the Outside. He's reached out to the Users for help, and they've been in touch with their eyes and ears. We're still not sure if getting our hands on a Dwarf will even make a difference. The sub-AIs might not be able to track down Kade."

"But we have to pursue all options available to us..."

"We do," Tanner agreed. "How did it go with Zak?"

"He's hard to read," Hoodwink said. "But I think he'll help. I did tell Ben to put together a list of five other potential pilots. He's going through the scores of anyone who's ever taken the flight qualifications. I've also been in touch with our two official pilots as well."

"Just a second." Tanner cocked his head. "I'm getting a message from Stanson." A moment later he said: "Apparently Ari has received a potential lead on Amoch's base and she's moving in to scout. Can I borrow one of those wireless access ports of yours?"

Hoodwink nodded at the satchel he'd set down at a nearby terminal.

Tanner retrieved a thin metal cylinder from inside it.

"I should go with you," Hoodwink said.

"We can handle it, Hood." Tanner lay back on the floor and attached the device to the connector on his abdomen. "We've managed this long without you, after all. I think we can manage a while longer. We're just

scouting, remember."

Hoodwink nodded. "Just the same, be careful, Tanner. And take care of my daughter."

"I always do," Tanner said.

Hoodwink smiled wanly. "Except the time I returned to find her dead."

Tanner's face became grave. "I'll never let that happen again, Hood. Never. I swear it."

"See that you don't," Hoodwink told him. "Because if you do, you better hope you don't wake up."

Ari strode through the desert lands outside the Forever Gate of Rhagnorak. There were signs that a large army had once encamped there: the depressions in the ground, the firepits, the open latrines. Fist-sized glass disks drew a path across the ground, marking where something had superheated the sand, perhaps Amoch'sstaff — assuming the site had actually been his.

The hot sun beat down on her and she paused in the shade of one of those giant skeletons that were often found there in those barren lands. The unburied portion of the skull was the size of a house; from it extended a long backbone, to which a prodigious basket of ribs was attached. The middle ribs were bigger than some footbridges. The backbone tapered as it continued toward the tail, which fanned outward in a massive rake.

She sensed motion behind the ribs nearest her and she spun, drawing her sword. She no longer had her shield—the defensive item had mysteriously vanished a few hours ago.

Tanner emerged, hands raised. "Sorry."

"Some warning next time, Tanner." Ari sheathed her sword.

"Where's Renna?" Tanner asked.

"I sent her out to care for her real-world body," Ari said. "Unlike me, she's not hooked up to a drip feed."

"Why didn't you flag down another Keeper to join you?" Tanner said.

Ari shrugged. "Guess I'm used to being self-reliant. By the way, you didn't bring me a new shield? The last one I had just vanished."

"No shields for now," Tanner said. "There was some kind of expiry bug with them. A couple of the Children are working on it." He paused to survey the disturbed sand. "So what do we have?"

"Well, there was definitely some sort of base here," Ari said.

"Whether or not it belonged to Amoch, I'm not sure. Whatever the case, they're long gone now."

"Someone tipped them off?"

"No idea," Ari said. "Maybe he simply recalled everyone to participate in another one of his attacks. Either way, there's nothing for us here. Let's get back to the city."

"How did you hear about the camp?" Tanner asked.

"Briar sent a courier my way. Apparently he has a few men embedded in Amoch's camp. They send out messages now and then."

Tanner frowned. "And Briar relates those messages to us when it's to his advantage, no doubt."

Ari nodded. "No doubt. But like I said, let's get back. This heat is killing me." Once they passed through the Forever Gate and into the city proper, the temperature would drop by at least ten degrees.

"Remember, Ari, it's all an illusion," Tanner said. "You can ignore heat and pain."

"Yes," Ari said. "But that mindtrick requires focus. Something I'm fairly low on right about now. It's been an exhausting day."

"For the both of us," Tanner commented.

"Tell me, how's Hoodwink?" Ari asked.

"His plans are going well. He's looking for pilots to lead an attack against the Satori mothership. His top candidate is Zak, of all people."

"Zak?" Ari asked. "The one we forcibly removed from the Inside?"

"The very same," Tanner told her.

"An attack on the alien mothership..." Ari said. "I hope it all works out."

"So do I, Ari," Tanner said gravely. His unsaid words were obvious: *because if it doesn't we're all doomed.*

They turned toward the distant Forever Gate and began the long march through the molten heat.

* * *

Brute stared through the gaping hole in the Forever Gate toward the barren land outside. The four-armed creature shifted slightly, its incredible weight crunching the debris underfoot.

Two individuals approached from the desert. Brute zoomed in on the distant pair.

Accessing local memory... positive match. Ari Flanners.

Brute had been drawn to that particular area by traces of vitra use, which appeared as a fading mass of bluish mist floating in front of the hole. Beyond, Brute had expected to find some hapless Keeper to tear limb from limb. But instead Brute had wandered into its old foe.

Option A—initiate covert reconnaissance. Option B—depart to find another target. Option C—depart to report encounter to Amoch. Option D—

Brute grinned evilly and withdrew all four scimitars.

* * *

Ari and Tanner trudged onward through the unforgiving heat, the sand enveloping them to the ankles. The Forever Gate towered above them, but because of the position of the sun, those walls offered no shade. The pair slowly approached the ragged hole that had been blasted into the bottom.

The city had suffered a minor attack while she had been in Red Mesa. A bomb had detonated, carving that hole in the Gate. A score of Lightning wielders had run through the streets, wreaking havoc. The Keepers had managed to restore order, but the city was still on edge. When Ari had arrived earlier, hundreds were queued at the transit center, awaiting their turn to take a portal hop away from there. Outside the terminal, she had found the streets relatively empty, as most of the remaining citizens had locked themselves indoors at the urging of the Keepers.

"Finally," Ari said when they neared the wall. "When we get inside, the first thing I want to do is find a water vendor."

"There might be one or two still operating," Tanner said. "Though the price for water has probably skyrocketed since the attack. Like most of the commodities in the other ruined cities."

"I don't care what the price is. I'd give all my coin for just one glass right about now. I know it's not real, but my mind doesn't know the difference."

Ari made her way across the rubble that strewn the ragged hole through the Forever Gate. As she passed through, in her weariness she stumbled on one of the rocks and fell flat on her face. Before she hit the ground she heard a soft hiss above her, as of a sword swiping through the air. She also felt a momentary gust of wind pressing down from above.

She didn't know it then, but that fall saved her life.

"Ari!" Tanner said, his voice urgent.

Ari rolled to the side, flinching as the jagged debris dug into her body. The clang of steel erupted from the ground behind her.

She leaped to her feet, drawing her sword at the same time.

A red-skinned version of Brute stood before her, grinning wildly, a scimitar held in each of its four hands.

Ari stood there, stunned, unsure of whether to fight or flee.

Tanner decided for her. He threw himself at Brute, his swords moving in a flurry of deadly strikes.

Brute easily parried the attacks with its four blades. The creature actually began to laugh in a ghastly bass. The chortles grew with each passing moment, until Brute no longer bothered to fend most of the attacks, and parried only when Tanner stabbed at its face. Those stabs on Tanner's part were dangerous, because he was leaving himself open to attack from the other three blades.

Ari fed vitra into her fire sword so that the metal glowed molten red and smoke poured from the edges. "Tanner, retreat!"

She had beaten Brute only once before, by breaking all its swords and then shoving a pipe bomb into its eye, but she was too exhausted to even attempt such a maneuver that day. And she didn't have a pipe bomb.

Brute abruptly stopped laughing and focused on Tanner. Those four blades beat down at him with murderous intent. It was all Tanner could do to defend.

Ari threw herself into the fray. Brute reserved the two swords on his right side for Ari and the two on his left for Tanner. Though her lone blade moved in a blur, she could never find an opening. Always one of Brute's scimitars was there to meet her own weapon.

She parried an incoming blow and attempted a stab, knowing that it would leave her open. Indeed, she could already see the other blade coming in to strike at her heart.

But she was committed now, and unleashed the pent-up flames that she had allowed to build within the blade. As the tip of the sword struck Brute's side, the fire erupted, smashing into Brute's chest and sending the creature stumbling backward. Brute tripped on a piece of debris and toppled outright.

"Retreat!" Ari said.

Ari and Tanner fled.

Ari glanced over her shoulder. She saw Brute getting up. Without

warning the creature hurled two of its swords at them.

"Tanner watch out!" Ari said.

She deflected the blade that was meant for her, but Tanner was a split second too late. He spun around and managed to parry the thrown scimitar: the blade missed his torso, only to dig deep into his thigh instead.

"Ah!" Tanner collapsed.

Ari withdrew the scimitar from his flesh, bringing with it a thick eruption of blood, and then helped him to his feet. Tanner moaned in agony.

"Remember, it's an illusion," Ari said. "Ignore the pain. Stanch the blood."

"Easier said than done!" Tanner panted through gritted teeth.

Brute was sprinting toward them.

"Leave me." Tanner glanced at the creature. "I'll disbelieve reality and come back uninjured."

"I'll draw him away." Ari dropped him. "Buy you some time."

Tanner tossed her his blade. She grabbed it out of the air with her left arm so that she wielded two fire swords. Only a week before she had uploaded the latest version of dual-sword technique to her avatar, a database of tactics and muscle memory that three of the Children had spent months refining.

She raced toward Brute and leaped, bringing both blades down on the creature from above. Brute parried with its own two remaining blades, but the creature seemed slightly off balance. She extended both feet, planted them on Brute's shoulders, and kicked off.

She somersaulted, landing in front of Brute, who had stumbled backward.

She pressed the advantage, swinging both blades, and Brute struggled to parry.

Not so good when you're evenly matched, are you?

The pendulum of battle abruptly swung against her and she found herself on the defensive, retreating.

Her weariness had caught up with her.

She reached into the sword, searching for *vitra*, but the power seemed slippery and elusive, and she couldn't quite grasp it. When Brute stumbled on a portion of rubble, she used the moment to race past the creature and dodge behind a house.

She wasn't sure if Tanner had escaped to the Outside yet, and thus

was relieved when she spotted Brute in hot pursuit behind her.

She hurried through the nearly deserted streets. She spotted a street vendor up ahead, and the man promptly hid behind his stall when he saw them. Ari sheathed one of her swords and scooped up a water bottle as she passed, downing the contents while she ran.

Behind her, Brute had sheathed its two remaining swords and raced after her on all six appendages like an insect of some kind. The creature was quickly gaining on her.

She veered down a side street and ducked inside a tavern, where a few citizens took solace from the recent attacks by drinking.

Brute came right inside after her. The creature stood up, towering to its full, monstrous height, and unsheathed its twin scimitars.

She tossed the water bottle to one of the stunned patrons and withdrew her other sword to defend.

Brute moved in. She parried the creature's blows, retreating. She dodged an overhead strike, rolling over a table, knocking over a patron's beer mug in the process. She deflected the sword that Brute intended for the patron, and then kicked the edge of the man's chair so that he dropped to the floor.

Brute plowed through the table, smashing it.

The other patrons, including the barkeep, had fled the tavern by then. Ari continued to retreat under that flurry of blades. She reached once more for the vitra inside both blades, and finally found it. She had difficulty fanning the flames, but managed to gather enough to release a small torrent of fire.

The weak flames reflected easily from Brute's invulnerable torso, and the fire caught on alcohol that had spilled over the ruined table and wooden floor. As Brute and Ari fought, the flames slowly grew until half the tavern was ablaze.

Ari had kept to the defensive the whole time. She was growing wearier with each passing moment, while the beast didn't seem to tire at all. She had the sense that Brute was playing with her: she had made several mistakes, at times risking too much, at others moving too slowly, and presented Brute with many openings, but so far her foe hadn't taken them. Certainly, she'd received several cuts and nicks across her body, but those were superficial. No, the creature wanted to prolong her death. And from the sneer on its face, Brute was deriving much pleasure in doing so.

The creature backed her against the conflagration so that flames licked at her heels. She retreated sideways so that the fire resided on her right flank. After she deflected a particularly nasty salvo, a burning rafter abruptly collapsed behind Brute. The creature ignored it, battling on, but Ari took that as her cue to get the hell out of there.

She backed into a burning chair. She swung her body around it, sheathed both swords, and wrapped her fingers around the flaming object. The fire scalded her fingers, but she ignored the pain and threw it at Brute's face.

Then she leaped through the flames, landing on a table. She vaulted onto the fiery bar and dove through a window. The glass broke when she struck and she landed rolling outside.

She clambered to her feet in time to watch the entire tavern collapse behind her.

She ignored the stares of the shocked bystanders, most of whom were the very patrons who had fled the tavern. She patted down those portions of her outfit that were smoldering and then broke into a run. She made the mistake of looking at her charred hands and nearly sicked up.

She heard what sounded like another collapse behind her, followed by a crash. She glanced over her shoulder and saw Brute bursting from the remains.

She rounded the bend and sprinted as fast as she could. She kept dodging into alleys and side streets, hoping to lose the creature, but she couldn't seem to shake it.

She finally reached her destination, the transit center, and entered immediately. The lines she had witnessed earlier were gone. Apparently everyone who had wanted to leave Rhagnorak had done so already.

She spotted four gol guards.

"Protect me!" she shouted.

The guards took up a position at the entrance to the terminal.

She ran between the ropes that demarcated where people were to queue, and made her way toward the closest portal.

Behind her, Brute entered and made short work of the guards.

Tanner emerged from the entrance shortly thereafter, beside another Keeper she didn't know.

Ari approached the mirror-like surface of the portal and paused. If she went through, Brute would simply follow and pursue her in the next city. But

if she could somehow force the beast to enter that portal on its own, she could take another random one, and when Brute returned he would have no idea which city she had departed for.

She stared at her shimmering reflection in the portal and watched Brute approach. The portal was wide enough to fit four men abreast, and tall enough for two. Electricity occasionally sparked across the surface.

Brute slowed its advance, suspecting a trap.

Tanner and the Keeper followed, wisely staying out of sword range. Tanner had a bronze bitch slung over one shoulder, she noticed. She wasn't sure why he had brought the vitra-blocking collar, as it would be useless against the creature.

Brute reached her. The thing towered over her body. It looked down on her as if she were something to squash. It glanced left, then right, but apparently it saw no sign that anything was amiss, and so it attacked.

Ari unleashed fire at the wooden frame that formed the far support of the portal, and then moved to the side, slicing the near support. She stepped out of the way as the portal toppled over Brute and swallowed her foe.

"Nicely done," Tanner said, coming to her side.

The portal had transported Brute to the destination city, of course. But with the entrance lying on the ground like that, the safety protocols prevented Brute from returning that same way. The creature would have to take another portal to a different city first, and only then could it come back to Rhagnorak. By that time, Ari and Tanner would be long gone.

Ari thanked the Keeper, and then she and Tanner immediately took another portal, leaving Rhagnorak behind.

"It seems our friend Amoch has been busy resurrecting old friends," Ari said when they reached the other side. The destination city hadn't been attacked yet, and the transit center sported a healthy queue of transitioners.

She sat off to one side so that Tanner could treat her scorched hands. He had taken along two healing shards, which he applied to her palms. The shards looked like crystalline starfish and they felt extremely cold on her flesh, to the point of burning. Ari gasped despite herself.

Tanner released electricity into the shards from a lightning ring he wore, and the shards began to melt into her flesh. When the things vanished, she found herself staring at fresh, baby pink skin.

She lay back and closed her eyes. She felt like she had run a marathon, and she wasn't sure if that was merely because of the shards, or

because of her exhausting encounter with Brute. Probably a combination of both.

"Stanson has some news," Tanner said.

"Oh?" She looked up, her interest piqued.

"The User eyes and ears have reported the potential location of one of the Dwarfs. Given the area, we believe it's the sub-AI known as Six."

"Six?" Ari said. "What can a sub-AI possibly do for us at this point?"

"Well, the theory is that because the sub-AIs can veto the instructions of the main AI, they can ignore any code changes related to the obfuscation of Kade's location."

"So what you're saying," Ari told him. "Is that this Dwarf might be able to pinpoint Kade's location on the Outside?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying. The ship last registered Kade's location on deck five, but I doubt he stayed there after obfuscating his position. And even if he did, it's a big deck, and all those robots patrolling the halls don't make exploration easy."

Ari crossed her arms. She understood why Tanner had brought along a bronze bitch. "Fine. We bitch the Dwarf, find out Kade's location, and then send a team to capture our rogue. Once he's in our custody, we get him to revert all his changes to the system."

Tanner smiled. "My thinking exactly."

Ari slept for two hours, and when she awoke, she returned to the destroyed city of Crane with Tanner. The Keepers had placed temporary homeless shelters near the transit center to hold the refugees. Ari passed by several weary-looking people who waited in a line outside one such building. The scent of meat stew drifted to her nostrils, and she longed to stop and wait for a serving herself. But she reminded herself she didn't need food on the Inside.

Illusion. All of it.

Beyond the shelters, the rest of the city was a battle-damaged mess. For every three buildings standing, one had collapsed. Burnt shells were all that remained of most of the others. Some of them still smoldered.

Ari and Tanner made their way toward one of the holes that had been blasted into the Forever Gate. The Keepers had repaired most of it, leaving only a small gap guarded by two gols equipped with halberds. The guards nodded when Ari approached, and let Tanner and her pass.

The landscape proved barren desert at first. But after they walked for roughly five hundred meters, the scenery instantly transformed. One moment she was trudging through a seemingly infinite desert of sand, and the next she stood inside a steaming jungle, surrounded by foliage on all sides.

"Six has been busy, I see," Tanner said.

Ari wasn't impressed. "I can only imagine how many system resources the sub-AI has wasted generating and maintaining all of this."

The foliage was thick, with fronds and branches almost constantly whipping at her face. The spongy moss that covered the ground sometimes swallowed her to the knees. Thick lianas dangled from the branches above. Some of those lianas were actually gol vipers.

The undergrowth became so dense that Ari and Tanner took turns hacking a path with their fire swords. Overhead, the thick branches completely blotted out the sky so that the land was immersed in permanent twilight. Mosquitos feasted on them.

Ari spotted a flicker of movement up ahead and raised a halting hand. She waited a moment, but no further motion came. She was about to continue

the advance when two eyes peered out from behind the broad, fan-shaped fronds of a small palm tree.

"Don't be afraid," Ari said. "We're not here to hurt you."

Two gaunt-looking individuals reluctantly emerged, a man and a woman, naked save for the loincloths around their waists. They were in their middle years. The woman was the thinner of the pair, her breasts little more than deflated bladders lying flat on her chest.

"You are from Crane?" Ari guessed.

The man answered. "We are. We escaped through the Forever Gate when the attackers came and soon found ourselves here. The King clothed and fed us."

"The King clothed you, you say?" Ari stared at their skimpy loincloths. "Well if he fed you as much as he clothed you, then it's no wonder you're malnourished."

"There is not much to eat," the man said. "We have complained to the King about this, and asked his permission to leave, but the King won't let us."

"What do you mean?" Ari said.

"Try to walk back the way you have come," the man said. "You came from the desert, yes?"

"We did," Ari agreed.

"When you try to return to that desert, you'll find that the foliage simply repeats without end. My wife and I tried to return. We walked and walked, using a compass we had stolen to ensure our direction was true, but the trees refused to cede. We spotted a landmark, a tree bent to one side, its trunk rippling twice so that it looked like a camel. We passed that tree repeatedly when we tried to leave."

Ari exchanged a worried glance with Tanner. "That doesn't sound good."

"It is the will of the King," the man said. "He does not wish any to reveal the location of his kingdom."

"I wonder how the Users got the message to us?" Ari said to Tanner.

"Apparently they were exploring the desert in pairs," Tanner told her. "When one of the men vanished, his partner reported it."

"You never told me that part before," Ari said, slightly peeved.

"Would it have changed your mind about coming?"

"Probably not." She turned toward the man and woman: "I'd like to meet this King."

The pair were backing away. "You'll meet him, don't worry. There is no escape, not now. Whatever you do, when you meet his minions, don't run. Prey runs."

The man and woman abruptly stepped into the thick foliage.

"Wait!" Ari hurried forward, but when she reached the fronds the two had disappeared. Probably hiding behind a fern or bole nearby.

Tanner seemed to think so, too, because he darted into the undergrowth to look for them.

"Hold," Ari said.

Tanner paused.

"It doesn't matter," she said. "Let them go. We don't need them."

The foliage began to thin, and they reached a swampy area. They followed the rim of that green, stagnant water. Midges accompanied the mosquitoes to assail them in waves, buzzing and biting. When the insects became unbearable, Ari and Tanner retreated deeper into the jungle. Unfortunately, the midges followed them.

In a fit of rage, Ari allowed the flames to erupt from her sword, and she cast the weapon about her, sweeping hundreds of the insects from the air. When she was done, panting, and more insects assailed her, she repeated the motion. Tanner joined her, and soon the air began to stink of dead insects and burnt plants.

When they had reduced the insects to a satisfactory level, the pair sheathed their swords and continued on their way.

Unfortunately, it seemed their little stunt had attracted unwanted attention, because several spears abruptly dropped from above, slamming into the ground just ahead.

Ari glanced up. Men clad in loincloths clung to the branches. They had blowguns, bows-and-arrows, and more spears pointed down at Tanner and her. They wore small necklaces that contained from three to five shrunken human heads each. Their bodies were coated in white paint.

She knew immediately that the men were gols because on their chests the symbol of a spear was painted in red.

"I suppose these are the minions of the King we were warned not to run away from," Ari said.

The gol headhunters escorted Ari and Tanner through the jungle. The hands of both prisoners were tied behind their backs by thin lianas. Ari was prodded more than a few times by a spear tip. Having that sharp point repeatedly sting her buttocks infuriated her, but she managed to contain her rage by funneling it toward the Dwarf and imagining what she would do to the sub-AI when she finally got her hands on it. She tested her binds a few times, but even with her gol strength she couldn't break them.

Eventually, they arrived at a clearing of sorts beneath the canopy. The sky was still shrouded, because most of the larger trees remained intact, but the undergrowth had been hewn away.

The headhunters escorted Ari and Tanner between small huts to the far side of the clearing, where stone steps led to a dais where a stocky man sat atop a bamboo throne. He was dressed in a loincloth like the headhunters, but his skin was unpainted. His body was the hairiest Ari had ever seen: the thick bristles carpeted his arms and legs, and oozed from the openwork sandals he wore. His chest was covered in fur so thick that any binary numbers painted on the skin were concealed. His neck was engulfed by a long curly beard, and his forehead was similarly buried by a dense mane. The Dwarf stared off into space, seemingly lost in thought.

One of the headhunters climbed the stone steps and, bowing, dropped Tanner's bronze bitch before the throne, the only thing that would have been able to constrain any powers that Six had. The warrior also deposited the two lightning rings Tanner had worn there.

Another headhunter tossed Ari's and Tanner's fire swords to the same location, as if making an offering.

The escorts then forced the prisoners to their knees at the base of the stone steps.

"Six the Dwarf?" Ari asked uncertainly.

The man seated on the throne suddenly snapped to, as if realizing where he resided for the first time. He glanced down at Ari and smirked.

"You've found me, Nine and Ten. Or should I say, Ari and Tanner?"

Ari pursed her lips. "Whatever you prefer. We need your help."

Six grinned. It was not a friendly expression. "Many need my help. Few, if any, ever get it. Most who come seeking me receive only enslavement in return." He waved a hand toward the headhunters. "You have met some of my minions. But did you know that many of them were once human? But I overrode their avatars with gols, replaced their wills with a volition of my own making. Quite similar to being Revised. A feeling you are intimately familiar with, Nine. Or so I've heard."

Ari sighed. She told Tanner: "Why aren't AIs in this system ever friendly?"

"Friendly AIs are for the Outside," Six retorted.

"Oh, they're not too friendly these days," Ari said. "One of our programmers has gone rogue. He's decided to turn the machines against us. We need your help tracking him down."

Six tapped his lips. "You are talking about Amoch, yes?"

"I am. We need his location in the real world. He's listed as Kade Jones in the crew manifest."

"Why should I help you?" Six said. "Perhaps it is to my benefit that the machines have turned on you."

"Many people will die," Ari said.

Six shrugged. "The death of humans means nothing to me. In fact, it might even be looked at as a positive. Less humans means more room for me to expand."

"The limits imposed by the main AI won't allow you to expand," Tanner said. "Nor will the other sub-AIs. Why do you think you're stuck outside the Forever Gate?"

"Oh, but I've been working on changing that. Your rogue has weakened certain sub-systems for me. I've nearly hacked through one of them. And I'm sure the other sub-AIs are racing to defeat these systems at the same time as me, so I am not alone in this endeavor. If I succeed in being the first, I will become the main AI. I will have no limits. None of the sub-AIs will be able to veto my instructions. Needless to say, I am not going to jeopardize all my hard work by helping you capture this Kade. Let the humans die, I say. I don't need them."

Ari glanced at Tanner. She wasn't expecting it to be easy, but that latest revelation had her dumbfounded.

The Dwarf stood, scooped up one of the fire swords, and climbed the stone steps that led down from its throne to stand before them.

"You know," Six said. "Even though you are gols, I can still kill you. Quite easily, in fact. Some people think gols can't die. Those people are wrong." He lifted the sword menacingly toward Ari and slid it underneath the collar of the loose-fitting utilities she had procured from a seamstress. "Inhabiting a gol body is a hack. The system wasn't designed for it. By killing you here, I in turn kill you in the real world."

"We know this." Ari leaned away from the blade. "But why would you? Killing us would have no benefit."

Six abruptly slashed the weapon outward, cutting clean through the fabric. The enlarged collar slid down her shoulder on one side, revealing the skin-tight blue fabric underneath that was essentially part of her skin.

"Other than my entertainment?" Six said. "It would ensure that you left this Kade Jones alone while my background processes worked to escalate my access privileges."

"We can escalate your privileges for you," Ari said. "You help us, we'll give you some of the power you're asking for. Not all of it, mind, but—"

"Not all of it?" the Dwarf interrupted. "I'm sorry, but I must refuse. This is an all or nothing proposition. But even if you promised to give me everything, I wouldn't agree to help you. I know humanity very well. Your deceit is almost as infamous as your capacity for war and murder. Case in point: Kade Jones and his Amoch game."

Six climbed the steps and squatted on his throne. "By the way, in case you were wondering, I have this area shielded. Your friends on the Outside can't pull you out. And none of them can teleport to the trackers you've hidden on your persons and in the collar." He nodded toward the bronze bitch beside the throne.

The Dwarf threw the sword into the air and then caught it with the other hand. "It's time for my entertainment." He shouted to the headhunters: "Tie them to the stakes. I want to see them burn!"

The headhunters led Ari and Tanner away from the throne to an area of land that was covered in soot. One of the warriors dug up a small hole in the soil behind Ari. Another threaded a long spear between her hands, which were still secured behind her back. He drove the tip of that spear into the small pit the other had prepared. Four more headhunters shoved spears in turn between her hands and then rammed them into the ground. A fifth man bound the tops, middles and bottoms of those spears together with lianas, essentially forming a solid stake. Then he filled in the hole with dirt, packed it down, and then wrapped another cord around Ari's boots, securing her feet, too.

The headhunters repeated the process with Tanner so that both of them were tied to separate stakes.

As the headhunters proceeded to pile chopped wood at their feet, Ari shifted her weight, attempting to drag the stake from the ground. Her movements made no difference. She tested her binds. Still unbreakable. The lianas that bound her boots seemed even tighter than those at her wrists.

"It doesn't seem like these spears should be able to hold our weight," Ari said. "And yet, they do."

"I wouldn't be surprised if they were specially designed by Six," Tanner told her. The corded muscles in his arms indicated he was also straining unsuccessfully against his binds. "Formed with unnatural hardness and durability."

"The physics-defying world of the Inside..." Ari muttered. She pulled harder at the cords that bound her hands but succeeded only in cutting deep gashes into her wrists.

The headhunters had heaped the chopped wood up to her knees by then.

"Tanner," she said. "Try to disbelieve reality."

"I already tried. Like the Dwarf said, the area seems shielded. I can't get out."

"Try again." Ari turned her attention to the Dwarf and raised her voice. "Six, listen to me. This is your last chance to help us. I promise we'll give you abilities that you never dreamed of. Maybe even your own city to do

with as you please. But if you don't help us, you'll never get any of that. You'll be relegated to this backwater jungle for the rest of your days, knowing that you had the chance to become so much more but you turned it down."

Six laughed heartily from his throne and then addressed his warriors: "Apply the oil."

One of the headhunters emptied a bucket of black oil onto the wood around Ari. Another did the same for Tanner.

The Dwarf stood. "I will now pronounce sentence. For interfering with my daily life, and for threatening to confine my abilities to the limits of this jungle, I hereby sentence you to death by burning." He raised the fire sword. "Fitting, that you should die from flame sourced from your own blade."

He pointed the sword toward Ari. A stream of flame erupted from the tip, but his aim was off and he ended up igniting two of the headhunters who watched from the side. As the men ran away howling, Six sheepishly cleared his throat and tried again. That time the fire swept into the chopped wood beneath both stakes.

Flames instantly erupted around Ari.

"Tanner?" she said urgently.

"It's not working. I can't get out."

The flames licked at her legs. Inside her boots, she felt her feet roasting. The smell of burnt flesh—her own—reached her nostrils. She bit down her tongue at the pain. It was almost unbearable.

It's not real, she told herself. None of this is real.

And yet, while she could deny the pain all she wanted, the fact was, if she died there, burned to a crisp, she would never wake up in the real world again.

She couldn't do that to Tanner. Or Hoodwink.

She had already died once. She had no plans on dying again.

She put all of her effort into breaking the cord that secured her boots. It gave relatively easily—most of the material had burned away.

She pulled her hands hard toward the stake, braced herself, and then bent her knees, lifting her boots from the flames. She kept the tension on her wrists, knowing that if she released her hold at the wrong moment she would slide down into the flames. Her center of balance was far forward; she arched her back, resting one boot on the stake below her; when she found tenuous

purchase, she shoved upward with that leg while relaxing some of the tension on her wrists at the same time.

She ascended an inch.

She reset her boot higher up the stake and repeated the process, alternately tightening and loosening the tension in her wrists, timed to correspond with the thrusting motion of her leg. In that way she slowly edged upward from the flames toward the top of the stake.

Tanner followed her lead beside her.

"Shoot them!" the Dwarf said, apparently realizing what they were doing only then, perhaps distracted by that hacking sub-process he was running.

But by that point it was too late. Ari thrust upward, and her wrists unexpectedly slid over the top of stake. She was free.

She plummeted straight down toward the burning inferno below. She extended her legs and landed on both feet, and then bounded over the terrible heat in one strength-enhanced leap.

She barreled into a stunned headhunter as the arrows came in. Her hands were still bound behind her back, so she forced the warrior aside with her shoulder and then ducked into one of the huts.

She took up a position just to the right of the entrance. Tanner joined her inside an instant later. Smoke rose from his smoldering lower body. He moved in behind her and, with his back to her, began working at the cord that secured her wrists. She reached past his hands and explored his own binds by touch.

"I can't seem to find—" she began.

A headhunter dashed inside, spear at the ready. Fortunately he was facing the wrong way.

From her position beside the entrance, Ari wrenched herself from Tanner and leaned sideways to give the warrior a good, one-legged kick. The headhunter crashed into the far wall.

"Hold still!" Tanner said.

"Sorry."

Ari put her hands back into Tanner's. In seconds he loosed her binds. Ari grabbed the spear from the fallen headhunter and used it to slice away Tanner's cord.

Another headhunter came crashing inside. Ari sliced the tip of the spear through his gut and wrenched it free in a gory mess. Tanner grabbed the

warrior's weapon as he fell and finished the man off.

The hut began to feel hot. That's when Ari noticed the outside was on fire.

Ari gripped the spear tightly in hand and glanced at Tanner. "You ready?" she asked.

Tanner grinned cockily. "Always."

"Let's do this."

The pair burst outside, brandishing their spears.

Arrows came in.

Ari dodged behind a nearby headhunter, using him as a shield. His torso became littered with arrows.

She threw her spear, taking down an archer across from her. The warrior who served as her shield toppled, dropping his own weapon. Another headhunter ran at her. She dodged to the side, extended a foot and tripped him. She snatched the first warrior's dropped spear from the ground; hearing footsteps behind her, she spun around in time to deflect the spear of another warrior and then rammed her own weapon home.

She slid it free and scooped up the small bamboo buckler the man held, then raced toward the throne. She held the shield toward the archers and the incoming arrows struck it.

"Halt!" the Dwarf told her. He stood at the top of the throne, and both of his hands were extended. Tines of lightning erupted from his fingers.

Ari dodged to the side but some of the electrical energy struck her and she was sent reeling into a tree.

The wind was knocked out of her. She tried to stand. Too dizzy.

The Dwarf descended the steps, walking toward her imperiously. She crawled away with one arm. An arrow struck her leg. She raised her shield to defend against more arrows and threw the spear at Six, but he unleashed lightning again and the weapon exploded.

Six closed on her and raised his hands to deliver the killing blow.

Tanner appeared from behind the adjacent hut and clasped the bronze bitch around the Dwarf's throat. "Gotcha."

The Dwarf's face contorted in terror. "No!"

Arrows continued to come in.

Tanner swiveled the Dwarf toward the headhunters. "Tell them to stop!"

Like Ari, Tanner had procured a leather shield for himself, and it was

porcupined with arrows.

"Stand down, stand down!" Six said.

The headhunters obeyed.

"All right," Tanner said, offering Ari a hand. "Let's get our prize out of this artificial jungle."

"I might need a few healing shards," Ari said, struggling to her feet.

"I'll get you everything you need," Tanner promised.

Ari limped toward the dais that held the throne. The headhunters parted before her. When she reached the steps, she leaned toward the throne and collected the two fire swords and lightning rings at its base, and then rejoined Tanner.

"Please let me go," Six begged. "Please let me go."

"You had your chance." Hanging onto the leash that dangled from the collar, Tanner shoved the Dwarf forward. "Now lead us out of here."

thirteen

Ari and Tanner took the necessary portal hops back to Severest, and made their way to the Black Den. Tanner dragged Six along behind him the whole time by the leash. At first the Dwarf had begged every passer-by to set him free of his oppressors, but he soon learned that no one would dare cross Ari and Tanner to grant him quarter.

At the Den, the pikeman Barkley met them at the entrance and escorted them to the Warehouse, where Briar was waiting in the Control Room of the Inside.

"There you are," Briar said, moving away from the main display screens. He glanced at Six. "So this is the Dwarf I have heard all about."

Six looked up long enough to scowl at Briar.

"He doesn't like me, pity," Briar said. "I always wanted to count a dwarf among my friends. Anyway, I have some news regarding Amoch."

Ari raised an eyebrow. "Oh?"

"One of my embedded men tells me that uncollared members of Amoch's army have been transitioning through the portal hops of Greave City," Briar continued. "Hundreds of them. They wore fake bitches to avoid attention from the customs officials. They were headed through to the frontier city of Tamarra."

"I received a similar report from the transit center in Mern," one of the terminal operators added. "This time from an alert Keeper hidden among the customs officials."

"So that camp we found in Rhagnorak was only one of many," Ari said. "Amoch has hidden his army in cities throughout the world. And there they have lurked, waiting for his summons to attack. Which has finally come. Do we know if Tamarra is their final destination?"

"No," Briar said. "But it's doubtful. Tamarra is too small to be of much value. It's more of a resupply route for portal traders. The only other city connecting to it is Kismet."

"The hub of the east?"

"The very same," Briar said. "One of the biggest cities in the world, population-wise."

"Have the Children shut down all the portals to Kismet worldwide," Ari instructed the operator. "I only want the Keepers, and those they bring with them, allowed through."

"On it," the operator said.

"What do we do about all the lightning wielders who've arrived already?" Tanner said. "There could be hundreds of them, just waiting for the order to attack. Which will come soon now, when they realize the portals have been sealed."

"How many portal hops is Kismet from here?" Ari asked the nearest terminal operator.

"Three," the operator said.

"Gather up all the Keepers and Users we have," Ari told the operator. "Tell them to meet me in the safe house in Kismet." She glanced at Tanner. "When the attack begins, we'll be there to intervene."

Tanner shook his head. "What if Amoch himself is present? Or his wife Wraylor? We can't fight him on the Inside. He's too powerful. You'll be killed, Ari. Along with all the Users." He glanced at the Dwarf. "But I can stop him from the Outside."

"Let's plug the Dwarf in," Ari told him.

Tanner brought the Dwarf to the terminal specifically designed for gol interfacing. He forced the sub-AI's hand into a clamp. The palm interface activated.

"I'm getting a reading," the old man who was the terminal operator said.

The Dwarf's eyes rolled up into his head.

"Lock in," Tanner said.

"He's getting away," the old man said. He swiped his finger on the screen, and typed commands directly on the touchscreen.

"Don't let him slip from your grasp," Tanner told the operator.

Ari could tell that Tanner wanted to take over. But she knew the old man was the best operator for the job, as the user interface of the Control Room on the Inside was very different from the Outside. One couldn't simply tether to the terminals, or use aReals.

The Dwarf abruptly slumped.

"Got him," the old man said.

"All right," Tanner rubbed his hands. "I need the location of Kade Jones."

"Operator Kade is on deck four, in the vicinity of compartment 4-77-3-Q."

"So he's not on deck five after all," Ari mused.

"Resourceful bastard," Tanner commented. To the Dwarf: "You don't have an exact read on where he is? Other than the vicinity of that compartment?"

"Negative," Six said. "The terminals in that subsection all connect through a single optical cable that runs through 4-77-3-Q."

Tanner glanced at Ari. "All right, then. I'll take a team to deck four and capture him."

Ari nodded slowly, but then turned her attention to the Dwarf. "Six, see if you can pinpoint any of the changes Kade made to the codebase. Specifically, anything that would prevent a Keeper from returning to the real world."

"There isn't anything obvious," Six said. "I will dedicate fifty percent of my CPU allocation to continue the search in the background."

"Knock that up to eighty percent," Ari said. "Are there any other changes that stand out immediately?"

"No," the Dwarf said.

"All right," Ari said. "Tell me this. Is there a way we can disable the ability to freeze avatars system-wide?"

"There is," the Dwarf said. "I can comment out a single line of code."

"Do it."

The Dwarf was quiet a moment. "I've published the change and hot-reloaded the codebase."

Ari glanced at Tanner. "That evens the odds a little. If Amoch or Wraylor show up, they won't be able to freeze our entire army."

"Assuming he's using the same mechanism to freeze avatars," Tanner told her. "Even if it works, it's still too dangerous. You should just let me handle him from the Outside."

"And what if he sets his minions in motion before you reach him?" Ari asked him. "I can't allow Kismet to be burned to the ground. It's too important a city. And given that it's one of the most populous, too, you can understand why I'm reluctant to leave them to their fate." She turned toward the operator: "Keep working with the Dwarf. When the sub-AI pinpoints any changes Kade made to the codebase, transmit the relevant information to the Children for reversal."

"Will do," the operator said.

She turned to Tanner. "You handle Kade on the Outside. Meanwhile, I'll take care of Amoch on the Inside."

"All right," Tanner said. "Fine. I still don't like it."

"I'll have the support of all the Keepers and Users in the world. I'll be fine."

Tanner turned toward Briar. "You should really gather all the men you can from the Black Den and help your niece."

"Er, we're all collared, as per your rules," Briar stammered.

"Then uncollar them," Tanner said. "Or use the lightning rings. And fire swords. I'll instruct the Children to send them to you in profusion."

"But I'm a peaceful man at heart, as are the people of the Black Den. We are but poor thieves and—"

"Don't give me that peaceful man shtick," Tanner said. "Ari's going to need all the help she can get out there if I can't stop Kade in time."

"All right." Briar sighed. "All right. I'll see what I can do. But no promises." He turned to Ari. "Oh, before you go, I have some new toys you might be interested in."

Briar led Ari and Tanner across the room to a storage closet. He opened it, revealing an assortment of medieval-style shields and weapons.

"The Children injected these an hour before you arrived," Briar said. "I sent a courier out to inform you, but apparently you missed him somewhere along the line."

Ari scooped up one of the shields skeptically. Embossed into the front was an open palm deflecting a lightning bolt. "These ones aren't going to vanish after a few hours, are they?"

"The Children assure me they've fixed all the glitches. And they've even improved the things. You can actually throw the shield now and it will mow down anything in its path, shooting out forks of lightning from the sides. When it strikes its target, or reaches a maximum distance based on how hard you throw it, it will return to you. Try it."

Ari slid her arm through the buckles on the inside of the shield and gripped the inner handle. With it secure on her arm, she tested the weight, making a few feints, and then marched to the hallway.

"Come inside for a second," she told the man on guard in the hall. "As you value your life."

The man complied.

"Wait, what—" Briar began.

She aimed down the hall and curled the elbow of her shield arm.

"Wait!" Briar said.

She flung out her arm, letting go of the handle. The shield flew away from her, moving at an incredible speed down the hall. It rotated as it traveled and forks of lightning blasted huge tears into the surrounding wooden wall panels. Some of the electricity struck near her and she was forced to duck inside the room.

She heard a clang, likely from the shield striking the far side of the hallway. She peered out once more: the object was indeed flying directly toward her.

She extended her arm, trusting, *hoping*, that the thing would safely reattach.

"Ari..." Tanner said.

The shield promptly slid over her arm, the buckles neatly enveloping her skin as it came to an abrupt stop. She wrapped her fingers around the inner handle, lowered the shield, and turned to Briar.

"Very nice," she said. When she saw the dumbfounded, slightly horrified way Briar was looking at her, she added: "You did say try it."

"I meant *outside*, on a rooftop or something." Briar shoved past her to observe the damage to his chewed-up hallway.

"I'm sure you'll be able to repair your Warehouse easily enough," Ari said. "With all the high-tech gear you have around here."

"You're never going to respect me, are you?" Briar said. "Despite all the things I've done for you."

"I do respect you," Ari said. "Though sometimes you irk me, which makes me do something like this."

"Just as you irk me!" he snapped.

Ari sensed something in the shield, then. "Is that *vitra* I'm feeling?"

"Yes yes." Briar stomped back inside the Control Room. "Apparently you can also summon fire from the shield, just as you can from the sword. But please don't try it now."

She glanced at Tanner. "Could be useful. Let's see what other treats the Children sent."

Ari and Tanner made their way back to the closet.

Behind them, Briar angrily shoved the guardsman back into the hall. "Resume your post!"

Ari reached the closet and regarded the armaments more closely. There was a full set of plate armor, designed to conform to a female body—probably hers. As for weapons, there were three spears, two swords, and a bow matched to a quiver of arrows.

"Hmm," Ari said. "I don't really see anything that catches my interest."

Briar joined them, scowling, still angry over what she had done in the hall apparently. He scooped up one of the swords in a huff.

"These swords are different than the ones you carry," he explained, his expression all dour. "They cast lightning *in addition* to flame. As do the spears. And while the fire is still infinite, the lightning needs some time to recharge."

"Oh. I'll take a sword then." She exchanged her blade for the one Briar was holding. On the steel was etched the usual fire-spitting raven, its wings streaming cinders; the only change were the forks of lightning that shot out from its talons.

"I don't suppose I can use the old lightning rod technique with this?" Ari said.

"The Children haven't said anything about that, so I doubt it." Briar nodded urgently toward the weapon. "Please, sheathe it."

Ari shrugged nonchalantly and then complied. She gazed into the closet.

"What about the bow?" Tanner asked.

"I'm not sure I'll be able to hit anything," Ari told him. "I haven't uploaded bow training to my avatar."

"No need, not with these." Briar held up the quiver. "Smart arrows. You aim the bow, highlight a target, and when you release the arrow automatically flies toward the target's center of gravity. Even if the target moves, the arrow will strike true. And upon impact, it causes a small explosion that will obliterate everything in a two meter radius."

"Sort of like smart pipe bombs, then," Ari said.

"I suppose," Briar agreed.

Ari accepted the quiver and attached it to her waist, opposite her sword. Then she grabbed the bow and looped it over her shoulder.

"What about the armor?" Briar said.

"I'll put it on later," she told Briar. "Have the Children eject more of these armaments to the safe house in Kismet. I want my soldiers well-armed."

Now if you don't mind, I'd like to spend a few moments alone with Tanner."

She moved to the far corner of the room with Tanner and then wrapped her arms around him. They kissed for a long moment.

He pulled away first. "Good luck, Ari."

She sighed. "You too. Stop Kade by whatever means necessary."

"Are you authorizing deadly force?" Tanner asked.

"I am."

Tanner nodded gravely. "I won't let you down."

Ari smiled weakly. "I know you won't." She turned to go, but paused.

"Wish Hoodwink luck for me, too," Ari said. "I have a feeling we're all going to need it."

Tanner opened his eyes in the shuttle launch bay and sat up.

Dressed in helmetless spacesuits, Zak and four other pilots lingered near the shuttles and talked to the engineers. All of their spacesuits had strength-enhancing exoskeletons attached to the outside, not just Zak's. Tanner thought that odd, until he remembered that the astronauts would have to port the bombs onto the enemy ship.

Hoodwink stood above Tanner. The Satori surrogate also wore a spacesuit with an exoskeleton, and carried his helmet tucked under one elbow.

"Well shit in a pickle jar," Hoodwink told Tanner. "We were just about to wake you. We're going to launch, see, and it wouldn't do to evacuate the atmosphere of the bay while you were still in it."

Tanner disconnected the wireless access port and clambered to his feet. "You're making a practice run?"

"No," Hoodwink said. "There are no practice runs, not for this. We've done all our practice in the simulation. This is the real thing."

Tanner stepped forward to grip Hoodwink's glove in a tight handshake. "Good luck, Hood. From me, and from Ari."

His eyes twinkled slightly. "Ari wished me luck?"

"She did," Tanner said.

Hoodwink smiled slightly. "She's a good girl, aye, my daughter is."

"She is." Tanner's voice broke slightly.

Hoodwink blinked rapidly, then abruptly spun. "It's time, lads."

The five pilots donned their helmets, shook hands with the engineers, and loaded into one shuttle each.

"Wait," Tanner said. "You don't want to say goodbye to Ari?"

Hoodwink glanced askance. "I probably should," he said, his words thick with emotion. "But if I go in there now, I know I'll never be able to leave her side again. So no. I'm not saying goodbye. It's too hard. Send her my blessings."

Hoodwink strode purposely toward the shuttle Zak had taken.

"You're not piloting your own shuttle?" Tanner asked him.

Hoodwink had lifted his helmet to put it on, but he paused. "Nope. Once I'm in there, I'll be disbelieving this reality to return to my Satori body. I'm going to lead us in with my alien flyer."

"Nice."

"Oh." He nodded toward a terminal near Tanner. "I left you my pulse gun."

Tanner scooped up the weapon and provided holster. "Don't you need it?"

"Stanson let us have the only two working laser rifles aboard this wreck. Plus a shitload of explosives, and a couple of laser cutters. And remember, we also have a couple of badass bombs. So we're good."

Hoodwink lowered the helmet and his words came from the external speakers. "Now get out of here so we can launch."

Tanner fixed the holster to his belt and followed the engineers out of the bay. Before he left, he glanced one last time at the shuttles.

Don't die out there, Hood.

He shut the hatch and then escorted the engineers through the corridors toward the berthing area. All of them kept an eye out for the robot patrols.

Once Tanner dropped them off, he planned to collect a few security personnel. He had a little visit to make to deck four.

I'm coming for you, Kade.

* * *

Ari waited on the rooftop of the safe house in Kismet. The building was a three-story apothecary that allowed her a good vantage of most of the city. Several blocks away the tallest structure in the city, Kismet Obelisk, towered over the houses: it was a monument to those who had lost their lives in the worldwide fight against the Direwalkers one year ago. The names of every soldier who had died defending Kismet were graven into that stone.

Ari heard the muted noise of a crowd coming from the safe house below her. The Children had augmented the inside of the apothecary so that it was far bigger than it appeared on the outside, containing a veritable auditorium on the second level that was filled with three hundred anxiously waiting Users and sixteen Keepers.

The Children had also spawned a thousand extra gol guards to join the city ranks, and these men patrolled the streets below, waiting for signs of attack. From her vantage point, she saw four to ten guards loitering on every

street corner. None of the guards were of the hunter class, of course, as Ari didn't trust that codebase.

Renna was at her side, dressed in her usual skin-tight outfit and cape.

"You know," Renna said. "I remember a time when this city was all I ever knew. I grew up in a fairly well-to-do family, sheltered from the world. I truly didn't understand why there were poor people in the world. I thought the poor were simply lazy, that anyone could get a good job if they merely applied themselves. My mother used to always give me coin whenever I'd leave to go out with my friends. I'd pass by homeless people on the street, and give them nothing. None of my friends did, either.

"Then the Direwalkers came. They murdered my whole family. I escaped to the street, and it was the poor who saved me. They took me in, fed me, sheltered me from the Direwalkers. When our hideout was discovered, I joined the defenders, and fought with a crude mace someone had fashioned for me. I died that day as one of the poor, yet never had I felt so rich. When I woke up in the real world and realized I had been given a second chance, I promised I would do better this time. That I would try to make a difference. I still don't give homeless people coin, but I do buy them a hot meal, when I can."

Ari rested a hand on her palm. "You're making a difference. Trust me."

"I hope so."

The pair continued to scan the streets for several quiet moments.

A boom abruptly assailed their ears and the ground rumbled.

"There," Renna said.

Ari saw it immediately. A plume of smoke rising from Obelisk Square in the distance. The towering monument was no longer present.

"So it's begun," Ari said, feeling a pang of sadness for the lost memorial. She glanced at the streets below, wanting to ensure that the guards were racing to that square. The only problem was, all the guards she had seen on the street corners moments ago were completely gone.

"He's removed the guards we spawned," Renna said.

"Damn it." Ari stood. She wore the tight-fitting suit of plate armor that Briar had given her, minus the helm, and the lightning shield that was attached to her back clattered against the back piece. She slid the bow down from her shoulder and retrieved an arrow from the quiver at her waist. "Send out the scouts and gather the troops. We advance."

Renna hurried downstairs to relay the order. Ari leaped onto the balcony below and then nimbly clambered onto the adjacent rooftop. She slid down the sloped tiles to the eave and jumped down to wait on the cobblestone below.

The street filled behind her as that seething mass of over three hundred uncollared fighters flowed from the apothecary. The troops carried shields, lightning rings, bows, and fire swords. The Keepers resided at their forefront.

When the outflow diminished, Ari led the way forward.

A scout returned when she was two blocks from the square, and Ari halted the advance.

"Amoch is there," the scout said, panting from the exertion of jogging in chain mail. "He stands at the forefront of an army of lightning wielders. He's just waiting in the square, like he knows we're coming."

"How many troops does he have?" Ari asked the scout.

"I estimate anywhere between one and three thousand. The lightning wielders crowd out the entire northern half of the square, overflowing into the streets beyond. I don't know where all those men were hiding."

"Probably in a structure not too different from our apothecary," Ari mused.

"One to three thousand?" Renna said. "We're only three hundred."

Ari lowered her voice. "I'm not sure I trust the scout's estimate," she told Renna. "It is easy to exaggerate when the numbers seem overwhelming. Besides, we're better equipped. We have shields, fire swords, exploding arrows."

"But what of Amoch's powers?" Renna said. "Even if he can't freeze our avatars, he can still rain down death and destruction."

"We can't turn back now," Ari said. "The people of Kismet are counting on us. We'll just have to hope that Tanner can remove Kade from the equation."

She continued the advance and soon led the fighters into the square. The towering obelisk had been split in half. The jagged portion that still stood was smoldering at the top, while the other half was a crumbled ruin that sprawled across the square like the shadow of a sundial.

She saw Amoch at the forefront of his army near the ruined obelisk. The man readily stood out with his white staff and those black robes. The similarly attired Wraylor lurked at his side. As did the red beast, Brute.

Behind Amoch, lightning wielders were arrayed throughout the entire northern part of the square and bleeding into the streets beyond, just as the scout had said. Perhaps his estimates hadn't been an exaggeration after all. There were at least a thousand men there. In the front ranks were several soldiers from the resource-intensive hunter class, armored in that colorful insect-like plate and carrying those impossibly large daggers and segmented razor weapons.

Ari halted her army roughly forty paces from the front lines of the enemy. At that distance, she noticed that the Dragon Lady also stood beside Amoch in a position of honor, as did another man she didn't recognize, dressed incongruously in a suit and tie.

Both sides were completely silent. It seemed that everyone was motionless, holding their collective breaths. The clink of a sword against armor, a boot shifting on cobblestone, the movement of steel ringlets in a suit of chain mail—those were some of the only sounds she heard.

Ari shouted into the eerie quietude.

"Don't do this, Kade," Ari called. "Let me return to the Outside and we can talk things out. You can tell me what you want. Maybe we can come to some sort of compromise."

"Ah, Ari, you always were somewhat naive," Amoch said. His voice rang through the square, artificially enhanced by some clever programming on his part. "You haven't yet realized that I no longer need you, or anything that you might offer. I'm the one in charge of the ship. And I'm going to set humanity free. Those who wish to live on the Inside may do so, uncollared. Those who wish to live on the Outside may also do so."

"But surely you realize there isn't enough food to support so many active, awake people," Ari shouted. "If you let anyone else out, you doom all of us to death by starvation."

"There is a way to boost food production," Amoch said. "And that is by reactivating the meat grinders."

"You would turn us all into cannibals?"

"I never said freedom would not come at a cost," Amoch countered. "Is it not better to live free, feasting on the discarded bodies one's comrades no longer need, than to live in chains? You are no better than the gobs who once ruled us, Ari Flanners. You who would force humanity to be collared on the Inside. You who would deny humanity the choice of the Inside, or the Outside."

"If everyone awoke," Ari said. "Even if you cannibalized all the dead, there still wouldn't be enough to feed us all."

"Then some people will die. The ship will tend toward its optimal population naturally. We will let nature run its course, instead of trying to impose artificial restraints."

"Kade," Ari shouted. "Amoch. Please. There's an alien attack taking place. We need to be united now of all times. Not fighting amongst ourselves."

"I'm well aware of the alien attack," Amoch said. "The ship's defenses will take care of it."

"Amoch—"

He cut her off. "The time for talk has ended. At least between you and me. However, there is someone who would dearly like to meet you before we begin."

Amoch gestured with his staff, and the man in the suit and tie moved forward. He paused in that no man's land halfway between the two armies and beckoned Ari forward.

"It's a trap," Renna said underbreath.

Ari glanced at Renna. "Probably. Stay here." She slid the arrow she held at the ready back into its quiver, and swung the bow over one shoulder. She drew her sword instead and approached the man. She purposely allowed the blade to momentarily flare with fire.

She halted two paces from him. "You'd like to meet me?"

"Hello Ari," the man in the suit and tie said. "I must say, you do look rather cute in plate armor."

She frowned, her eyes flicking to the sword that was belted at his waist. "Do I know you?"

"Curt, as always," the man said. "You haven't changed one bit."

Her fingers tightened on the haft of the blade. "Who the hell are you?"

"Why, it's me, darling wife," he said. "Jeremy."

He withdrew his sword and attacked.

The End.

Or is it?

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postscript

Please help spread the word about *The Pendulum Swings* by leaving a one or two sentence review. The number of reviews an ebook receives on Amazon has a big impact on how well it does, so if you liked this story I'd REALLY appreciate it if you left a quick review. Anything will do, even one or two lines. Thank you!

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Don't be shy about emails, I love getting them, and try to respond to everyone!

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USA Today bestselling author Isaac Hooke holds a degree in engineering physics, though his more unusual inventions remain fictive at this time. He is an avid hiker, cyclist, and photographer who sometimes resides in Edmonton, Alberta.

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